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APRIL 1940

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Cover illustration for "The Beast Plants" painted by Frank R. Paul

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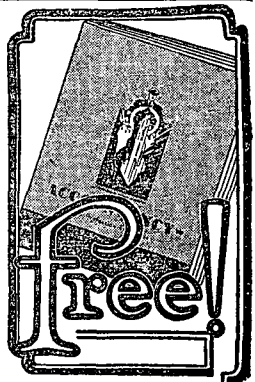

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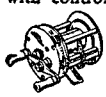

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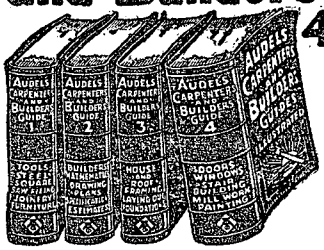

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"Stop both engines. Away the boarding party!" the captain shouted

The Devil of the Western Sea

By PHILIP M. FISHER

Time rolled back four centuries before the startled eyes of the Destroyer Shoshone's crew. Were they trapped forever in the past, or had they sailed into an eerie time-mirage from which they could escape?

FOREWORD

EVENTS of the past sometimes have in them things strangely prophetic of the present.

Some one will probably say to that statement: "Oh, yes, Ben Franklin, with his kite string, brought electricity from the clouds to his finger tips—and now we have the radio. What of that?"

But I do not mean the statement to be construed that way. Were I to re-word the

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thought, then, I might better say and perhaps more clearly, that there are certain strange occurrences of the years gone by that may be linked with, and are peculiarly explainable by, certain perhaps unusual events of today.

Please do not take that last as a gratuitous insult. The blame of it lies with me. I simply desire to be clear; to be very clear, indeed, for I wish all to understand with the same clarity that I understand myself, so that you, too, may come to agree with me in my conclusion.

There have been strange incidents in the past. There are strange events of today. It is my belief, sincere and frank, that between certain of those of the past and these of the present there lies a definite and explainable relationship.

There is in the archives of *La Academia de Historia* in Madrid, a manuscript, penned in a monkish hand upon parchment brittle and yellowing with age, that tells of one event of the past. It is one of many written by the professional historian, Francisco Verdugo de Coloma, and bears the quaintly charactered date of: *12 de Abril del año 1564*. It is entitled: *Otra Occurencia Mysteriosa de los Mares Occidentales*. And that it cites a case in point, the case in point, is my frank and whole-souled belief.

The following excerpt, a rather crude translation I fear, contains the very pertinent *résumé* that I would bring to your attention. Read it if you will, and carry its simple story with you as you continue on. And pardon if I persist and repeat. I want you to understand, and, when you finish, agree.

. . . . And thus, gray and forbidding, it rushed upon them. A monster of the deep, high-headed and huge, lean-bodied, and in length even as the greatest ship of the fleet; and as it approached in the dying sun, taking on by its awful witchcraft something of the appearance of a diabolic serpent ship—glowing, fiery eyes from head to tail, spouting black smoke as it roared down upon His Majesty's vessels, and snorting and bellowing as with rage at this invasion of its hunting grounds.

In pious supplication they fell upon their knees and begged forgiveness of Beloved Mary and of God and the Son of God, and the priests gave to all the final sacraments, then made exhortation that this hellish demon be conquered by the guns. Thus the fleet belched forth all its artillery, and the priests on bow and poop displayed the crucifix, and pronounced the curse of God.

At this the monster swerved somewhat from its onward rush so as to point its great head upon the middle of the fleet. The horrid panting of its breath came clearly across the waters, and a raucous, intermittent note as of sobbing reached their ears. Whereupon the priests exhorted with redoubled effort, and held the crucifix on high, and the cannon roared again.

At this the fiery eyes of the devil tight closed, and it emitted a scream as of the fear of God. Yet it rushed on and on, cleaving the sea and piling wave upon wave—then passed through our fleet, disturbing the equilibrium of the galleons with the lashings of its tail so that the priest Francisco de Casceres fell into the sea bearing his crucifix with him, and then he disappeared from sight.

At this all men fell upon their knees and besought mercy, thinking they were assuredly lost. And as by fear of the Power of Powers the monster bellowed again, and disappeared in the falling night. And all prayed in thanksgiving.

One hour later came another visitation.

A great white eye appeared, and swept the seas as in searching. It fell upon one galleon, and fixed upon it, growing ever greater and more blinding in the intensity of its devilish glare. Again the guns of the fleet belched forth, and this time the monster eye dimmed.

Shortly, mid awful fires, the Cristobal was seen to tear asunder, and a terrific bellowing roar shook the fleet. The eye peered forth again upon where the Cristobal had been, then dimmed once more. Again the same volcanic roar that shook

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the sea, and the Maria Nuestra blew asunder, and disappeared. And then another ship, and another, and still others, until eleven of His Majesty's galleons were gone beneath the sea.

In the darkness it seemed that the power of God were as naught before this thing of Satan, and the one galleon afloat, that of the vice-admiral of the fleet, and bearing the choicest treasure from Darien, silenced its guns and fled, hoping that God in His mercy would save them.

But the burning eye sought this last out, and with a great snorting and puffing the monster suddenly appeared and cried out in the voice of man speaking in a bastard Spanish tongue, saying that it was a friend. Whereupon all men fell upon their knees—the devil of the sea, in the clothing of a serpent-ship, ranged alongside, closed in with the galleon, and in a moment more the decks were alive with strangely clad, man-like demons to the number of two hundred. And all crossed themselves, believing that their day had come. But with the deceiving smiles of Satan these man-like spirits of evil made friendly approaches; and undaunted by the courageous priest, proceeded as by preconceived command to different parts of the ship.

Some, much begilded upon the arms, sought out the vice-admiral. Others brought up the treasure. Others still released the English pirate prisoners, and spirited them with the treasure onto the monster itself. Others attached iron ropes to the bow of the galleon and thence to the tail of the loudly breathing demon, whose stench had all but overcome the crew.

And shortly all the man-like things save sixteen returned to the monster, which, with much blowing and stench of smoke, proceeded on again, with His Majesty's ship helpless in tow.

Thus, for the space of twelve hours, when land appeared ahead, and buildings ashore which our officers declared to be of the New World city of Darien in the Panama, which they had left two days before.

Whereupon the sixteen man-like demons bade the anchor be dropped, and our vice-admiral, helpless under the spell they had cast upon him, complied. The great monster gave a screeching roar, and halted too, close aboard.

Thus for perhaps five minutes, when of a sudden the creature dissolved from sight. And the sixteen man-like demons on board the galleon vanished before the very eyes of our men.

Five men were seen struggling in the waters in the very space where the demon had last lain—but our own vessel heeded them not, believing it but another trick of evil. In haste the anchor was gotten up, and the galleon, favored by winds and the grace of God, made away with all sail. Truly the seas of *Las Indias Occidentales* are in the power of Satan, and it behooves His Majesty well that great fleets be sent with soldiery and priests to rid the water and the land of his evil—

Enough of the manuscript, with its story of the long past year, 1564. Two other paragraphs of it I have reserved to the end. They are more fitting in conclusion than as preface to the rather extraordinary event of the present day that follows.

CHAPTER I

SILENCE

THE door of the flagship's radio shack opened softly, and the squadron commander himself stepped in.

At the men's startled looks and movement as to arise, he shook his head and put his finger to his lips. His eyes went swiftly about the little room, then he bent quickly and pulled out a bucket, which he inverted, and sat upon. For a moment he pressed his temples, rubbing them gently as though some slight pain beat in them, or as a man might to soothe a growing perplexity. Then he drew from the pocket of his white coat a radio blank, white, with red lettering, and pored over, and over again, the three short lines in black typing that constituted the message sent up to him the night before. His eyes flashed

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once to the clock on the port bulkhead over the phones. And his lips moved slowly for the first time.

"Three—o'clock!"

The words were barely audible, yet the startled glances of the two operators betrayed their alertness, and that they had heard—and understood.

In the silence the squadron commander watched the radio officer as he tuned and retuned, as the key punctuated the hot hiss of the sparkling apparatus.

Suddenly the officer reached and pulled the switch that broke the sending contacts. Then he jerked off the head gear with a grunted oath.

"Not a damn thing, Biggins!"

The first class radio electrician leaped from his seat on the desk by the phones. "Sir?"

"Either I'm crazy, Biggins, or their radio is on the bum, or they've gone to the bottom of the sea with all hands. Take the watch—you know the stuff better than I do. Keep tryin', every second on the jump. You know what the matter is now, and we've got to get something or the old man'll go crazy with all—"

Something in Biggins' eyes made him swing about. At sight of the squadron commander he stopped short, his eyes wide open, his jaw dropped.

"Captain, I—"

The squadron commander raised his hand with a smile, nodding toward the set. "Nothing, Gordon?"

Lieutenant Gordon shook his head.

"Not a single word, captain. Not a single word. I don't understand it. They were in first rate condition when they went out. The experiments went O. K. And that message came through—that—"

"I know," said the captain, "Tuned to perfection. Quite ready to try it out."

There was a short silence, broken only by the hiss of the spark as Biggins sent out the call.

The squadron commander cleared his throat. "You are quite sure this set is in working order?"

Lieutenant Gordon nodded emphatically. "Absolutely, sir. I tested that out this morning at eleven. Had 'em semaphore to the Apache to open up, and we exchanged spark and phone for ten minutes. We're all right, captain, I know that. It's this other—thing. This—"

"The Apache's pretty close. How about your distance?"

The squadron commander shook his head in perplexity.

"Got Guantanamo with the spark at eleven-thirty, captain. I know we're all right, sir," insisted the lieutenant.

"Better let one of the other ships try to reach them."

"I did, sir." Gordon threw out his hands. "Between twelve noon and two o'clock, I had four of 'em open up in half-hour watches. They couldn't get a thing, sir. And since then I've been at the set myself. And still nothing doing. It's three fifteen now."

"They were due at eight o'clock this morning," the captain mused aloud. His eyes flashed to the clock. "And now—three sixteen. Seven hours since they should have dropped anchor. And nothing but silence since nine o'clock last night."

Slowly his black eyes met Gordon's. "Their position when they sent this message would put them not a hundred and sixty miles due east, at the most. One hundred and sixty miles—at fifteen knots—ten hours. They should have anchored before eight this morning."

GORDON stared at him in sympathy. The thing had been done by department order. It was not the squad. com.'s fault in any possible way. But, still, he had the responsibility.

"That—that message—" Gordon nodded to the radio blank—"it says that the experiment was successful, doesn't it, sir?"

The captain nodded heavily.

Gordon went on: "The Cheyenne and the Hopi got in at two. Nothing from them, sir? They found nothing?"

"Nothing, Gordon."

The radio officer swung about to Biggins, who was now listening, his head cocked to

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one side, one hand upon the wave dial, in the other a pencil ready at the pad.

"Anything doing, Biggins?"

The first class lifted one ear receiver.

"What's that, sir?"

"Do you get anything?"

"Not a thing, sir. It's just kind of—silent, sir."

CHAPTER II

RADIO

WHEN Professor Antonio Callieri first brought his discovery to the Navy Department he was listened to with patient interest. But when he was finally ushered to the door his heart was heavy within him. He had failed utterly.

He knew what wide sweeping effect upon all radio communication his discovery would have. He knew of the inestimable value it would be to any single world power into whose hands its secret would fall. And to America, the America that had done so much for world peace, he had dearly wished that secret to come. He swore within himself that he would yet persist. He would try again. And to that end he must get some one trusted by the United States Navy to help him.

Professor Callieri finally found his man. And through the medium of this man's understanding and his high influence, the navy came into control of the secret of what has come to be known as the Callieri Cool Wave.

Of the secret itself we have but little to say here, save for the fact that through it the strange relationship between events of the past and certain ones of the present have come, in my mind, at least, to be as clear as day.

Suffice it to say, then, that through the sifting of the ordinary electric wave through a peculiar, tube-like device, it was made possible to send through the ether a new type of wave impulse which could not be picked up by any other apparatus than one embodying with it the Callieri Detector. That should be sufficient—by its medium the intricate processes of coding and decoding messages in time of war might be entirely obviated. Messages could be transmitted in the ordinary manner, alien ears could not even detect their presence in the atmosphere, and alien minds would be none the wiser.

A destroyer was fitted with a sending and a receiving set. Another destroyer simply had the detector.

The place chosen for the experimental work was the Caribbean side of the Isthmus of Panama, and the work was to go on in a natural way, so that no outsider might suspect. The destroyer Shoshone, in whose radio shack had been connected the complete apparatus, was simply to proceed to sea for a couple of days' engine trial; the destroyer Osage, with the Callieri Detector only, would remain at anchor off Colon. The Shoshone would send, the Osage receive. If at any time during the trials it was deemed necessary to communicate from the Osage side, it were but by the simple cutting of an electrical contact that the ordinary radio would be put into play.

As suggested, it was done.

At eight on the morning of March 6, the Shoshone put to sea, fully equipped. The day was peaceful, weather no warmer than as ordinarily in the tropics, sea placid and gleaming like cut sheet lead under the slanting rays of the early sun. The meteorological observatory for the canal prophesied calm conditions, with no appreciable change in temperature. It seemed a splendid day for the experiment.

Everything turned out as Professor Callieri had declared it would. The Shoshone sent continuously, alternating between the usual radio wave and the new type. The Osage received all the messages sent. The Apache, lying at anchor within three hundred yards of the Osage, received only the messages coming by the ordinary medium. Between were blanks. No sound. Nothing to work on. Nothing to tune in. Simply blanks of utter radio silence. But the Osage caught all, and with the Callieri Detector filled in the blanks.

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It was an unqualified success.

At eight o'clock that evening the Shoshone sent in her position report to the squadron commander. And at nine she radioed that she would be with him at eight o'clock the next morning.

From that point on it were best that an eyewitness take up the narrative.

Lieutenant Graham Hardwick, Medical Corps, U. S. Navy, attached to the Shoshone as division doctor, told me the tale in the first case, and was kind enough to repeat it, in my presence, so that a yeoman stenographer might take it down verbatim. With some slight editing, his story of the rather extraordinary occurrences following the last message sent in to the squadron commander follows. Recall again the account of Francisco Verdugo de Coloma, penned in the year 1564, as you read on. The relationship, to me, is overwhelming. Follow on, and see if you, too, will not believe.

CHAPTER III

THE TERROR SUN

THE experiment had been a success.

I, myself, was the first to have the pleasure of grasping Professor Callieri by the hand in congratulation, and I thrilled to find him trembling with emotion. He was so happy. His work had been well received, his trial fully approved. And the country of his adoption was the richer and more powerful through his brain and through his effort. The tears almost welled into my eyes as I noted that his own lashes were blinking wet with them. The day augured to be a great one in our naval history.

At nine o'clock that evening all the data had been tabulated, all the signatures down.

At once the commanding officer radioed to the squadron commander that the Shoshone would arrive in Colon at about eight the next morning, and standard speed was run up on the engine room telegraphs. We turned our bows almost due west, and were shortly making our fifteen knots. The sea was smooth, the evening clear, though without moon, the temperature the customary tropical eighty-one. The day itself had been ideal for the work carried on—with no atmospheric eccentricities to interfere.

It was at this time that the professor requested permission to go to the radio shack for the purpose of trying an experiment that he intimated had been long in his mind, but that he had never attempted because of lack of such powerful equipment as a destroyer carried.

I know now something of the work he intended to do, and though I am no radio expert I can say at least that it entailed the conjoining of his own cool wave with that of the ordinary apparatus in such a manner that all other ordinary radio waves in the ether might be neutralized. The benefit of such a condition is easily seen. We could send our own secret messages in time of war or peace, then absolutely blank off the atmosphere to the passage of any alien work.

But the main point I desire to make is that this neutralization was to be effected by a combination of the ordinary wave impulse with the Callieri Cool Wave. The *combination,* you understand. It had never been tried on a large scale—it was a virgin experiment.

So the professor was given a free hand, and went below. It was past nine o'clock.

I remained on the bridge enjoying a cigar with the officer of the deck, and chatting over a coming boar hunt we were to have south of the canal during the coming weekend. We had been talking for perhaps ten minutes in the darkness of the bridge, with the black satin of the Caribbean spreading out ahead and about the ship, and the diamond stars projecting just above our heads as though ready for any plucking hand, when suddenly we found ourselves half blinded by a dazzling light in the west.

That sounds rather trite, perhaps. Blinded by a dazzling light in the west. But I assure you that it was not a trite thing

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to us—coming out of the deepening shadows of the night.

The sea suddenly sprang from the deepest black to the shimmering blue of day, and the long lance-like reflections from that light were momentarily torture to our eyes. The fo'c'sle of the ship leaped into life, and I could see the men asleep on their cool mats about the number one four-inch, one or two raised on their elbows staring, as was I.

I gasped. I felt that I had fallen asleep, and was in the midst of a strange dream. Half stupefied, I turned to the men about me.

And then I felt a spasmodic clutch at my right arm. The suddenness of it made me jump.

It was Ronleigh, who had the deck, and staring out as though mad with wonder, and with terror, too. It was not a dream—it was true; unbelievable, but true.

That dazzling light was the sun, the *sun*—and yet that same sun had set three hours before!

"God!" The word came from Lieutenant Ronleigh's lips. It was not an oath. It was more a prayer.

"Doc!" he suddenly shouted in my ear. "Tell me I'm awake! Tell me I'm sane. Tell me I am alive. The sun. The *sun*. Daylight! And not three hours ago—it *set*—a minute ago—a minute back it was—night! Doc!"

I could not answer. The ship was ahum with new life. Cries from fore and aft. Running of feet. The captain appeared, his face drawn and white, and a look of wonder in his eyes that I never wish to see again. Wonder in which was mingled a peculiar light of almost mystic awe, of fear.

Came a rush of feet, and more cries of astonishment. The bridge was crowded with our officers and those who had come aboard for the purpose of witnessing Callieri's experimenting.

For perhaps five minutes no man uttered a word.

And during those five minutes the sun slowly sank toward the western horizon, sank again toward its resting place beyond the seas. At six five it had slid once from sight, and night had closed in with its tropic alacrity, the day was done. And here—here at nine fifteen of the same night, three hours after it had let darkness have full sway, the sun was once more sinking toward its western harborage. An hour more, and it would set again.

Again!

Unbelievable! And yet—there it was. And one hundred and twenty sane men standing in wonder and in fear. I felt that if the deck were to open up beneath my feet and precipitate me suddenly to life in the center of the earth my wonder could not be greater. The sun—out of the darkness of the night—breaking out of the black western sky—come again to bring the day. Dropping now—setting for a *second* time!

Unbelievable. Yet, there it was!

WITH a sudden oath the captain leaped for the annunciators, and jerked the signal to stop. There came no answering swing of the indicators. He turned savagely on the port lookout.

"Get down there and get those men on the job! Call for the engineer officer. On the jump!"

The lad stared the captain full in the face, his jaw unhinged, his pale blue eyes wide open in a sightless stare. Then, without a sound, he collapsed on the deck.

I jumped to his side.

"Fainted, captain," I said quickly in answer to the latter's dumbstruck look of wonder. "One of you help me into the emergency cabin with him. Get water—I'll bring him 'round."

At that moment the engineer appeared, coatless, disheveled, black, swiped with grease. Some one else had collected the wit to call.

"You wanted me, captain?"

Captain Williams turned upon him with that dazed look still in his eyes. The lad with me suddenly groaned, and raised his head.

"What is the matter with—with—

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things?" he demanded, groping vaguely with an outstretched hand.

The captain knelt by his side, disregarding Lieutenant Porter, who was mopping the sweat from his forehead with a bit of oily waste.

"It's all right, lad," the captain said. "Here, you!" He turned to the other lookout. "Help this lad below."

The officer of the deck, suddenly alive, cried over the port sill to the men crowded on the fo'c's'le.

"Tell the bosun's mate of the watch to hustle up another lookout!"

The captain turned to the engineer.

I expected a tirade. But his voice came softly.

"Porter," he said, "what's the matter in the engine room?"

The lieutenant rubbed his hands with his bit of waste.

"Sir, the men—they saw—they heard that it—was—was shining again, and that crazy engineman yelled that it was the day of resurrection and jumped for the deck. I just came from below, sir." His wavering glance fixed upon the engine room telegraph dial. "Your signal's answered, captain. The engines are stopped."

The captain's eyes followed the engineer's. He nodded without a word. Then he stepped slowly over to the telegraphs, paused behind the stand as though in uncertainty—and it was the first time I had ever seen Commander Williams act thus—then slowly put the arrow at standard speed again.

"Ronleigh!"

"Sir?" returned the officer of the deck, alert now.

"Call down to the engine room to prepare for full speed on the two boilers lit off!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

The captain turned to me.

"Medico, what in the name of Heaven does this mean?"

He waved to the sinking sun.

I shook my head. His eyes dropped. Then he gave a short cough, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Ronleigh!"

The officer of the deck clamped the voice tube cap down.

"Get back on your course. We'll open her up wide when they're ready below."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The captain turned to us again. "Where's Callieri?" he demanded.

"In the radio shack—when we—left it, captain."

"He's a man of science. Ask him what this means."

THE assistant squadron radio officer was back in ten seconds, whiter of face than before, consternation in his eyes.

"The professor is dead, sir," he gasped.

"Dead!"

The man nodded, rubbing his hands and twisting them, his eyes peering over the captain's shoulder at the dying sun.

"Lying across the radio desk, captain. I thought he had just fainted, like—like the lad they took below—but I think he's dead, sir."

"Doctor—"

But I was already halfway down the ladder.

I stooped over the professor who had worked the wonder in radio that we had seen that day—the day before—the second day—I found myself in doubt. The body of Antonio Callieri was sprawled over the desk-like shelf before the instrument board, one hand on the key, the other evidently fallen from one of the tuning dials just above. The shack was deserted but for his quiet form.

I touched him. His body was tense and hard to my hand. The thought flashed to me: *rigor mortis* could not set in so soon. I seized Callieri's pulse, and breathed a sigh of relief.

The inventor was not dead. But something—perhaps he had unwittingly made contact with a bare wire and the shock—or the experiment he wanted to try. I could not tell. I saw no connection then between his own accident and the extraordinary return of day.

I laid him down on one of the radio

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operator's bunks, and applied restorative. To my infinite relief his eyes opened, and a breath of a sigh escaped his lips.

I confess that my gladness was so much that I might again go topside and see that miraculous second setting of the sun as it was that the man was alive. Five minutes I stayed, with my hospital apprentice under instruction as to the professor's care.

Then came a sudden hubbub on deck. A loud outcry. Then another. A chorus of them.

I suddenly felt the ship leap throbbingly beneath me, tremulous as with a newly invigorated life.

I bent over Professor Callieri and asked him how he felt.

"Bettair, bettair, doctor. I—I but wondair what ees t'ees light—eet ees anothair day, no? I haf been vairee eel?"

I saw at once that I had better not inform him just yet of the unheard of situation outside.

"It's all right, professor," I whispered. "Just take it easy for half an hour or so, and we'll have you on your feet."

Again came a cry from topside. And a chorused shout.

Then the ship heeled. She was swinging off to one side! Where? Why? The captain had just said that we would go on.

Came a rush of feet, and the sudden clang of an iron hatch cover.

A long scream of the siren.

I rushed from the radio shack, and scrambled to the bridge.

The dying sun was about me. The sun—that unbelievable sun—was turning golden as it neared its journey's end.

Every man on the bridge was staring out to port, and I noted that the ship's head was swinging in that direction.

I seized somebody's arm. "Quick! Shall I get the professor up? Are we in danger?"

He raised his arm and pointed.

"There! Look! Of all the wonders of heaven, what will happen next? Look there!"

I looked in the direction he indicated, and stiffened once more in rigid astonishment and awe—and with somewhat of fear, too, for who could dream of what terrible thing would yet come?

CHAPTER IV

THE CRASH OF GUNS

NOT a mile away was a fleet of ships. But such ships!

Twelve of them I counted, twelve ships in a fleet. Men of war? Surely not—not men of war. Men of war in this day do not carry sail. And yet—merchantmen? Merchantmen do not go to sea in peace times in groups of twelve.

I stepped beside the captain, using my doctor's privilege.

"Captain," I began. "What—"

He turned his blank eyes upon me, and shrugged his shoulders.

"We're going to find out," he said grimly.

I stared.

High pooped, deep bellied, tall bowed—twelve ships. Four masted—two towering from the waist; two tiny ones—at stem and stern. From the former, great, ballooned sail; from the latter, smaller spreads of rounded canvas. And all—all reflecting crimson gold in the flame of the second sinking of the sun.

Where had I seen such ships before? Where in my life— *Such* ships!

We were approaching fast, the Shoshone pulsing to her engine's turn. I glanced at the engine room annunciators. Full speed! I reflected. Two boilers. That would mean nearly thirty knots! Automobile speed.

The vessels grew larger. We could see details.

Banners whipping. Colors. Crimsons. Golds.

Guns—peering from battlemented ports. Guns that gleamed golden in the sun. Brass cannon—or bronze.

Figures. Movement about the decks. Men!

The Shoshone heeled again. We were almost upon them, not five hundred yards away, running on a parallel course.

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The captain gave a great oath. "By heaven, what flag is that they fly?"

I stared at the banners of the nearest ship. Those colors! Crimson and gold.

As I opened my mouth, came a gasping cry at my side.

"Galleons!"

It was Professor Callieri, rigid, one arm outstretched stiffly.

We rushed down their flank. Every eye was upon the strange vessels.

I stared at the captain. His knuckles shown white on the port sill. The word had broken from him as though forced by some other power than his own will. He was staring out upon the extraordinary apparition as though transfixed with wonder. His face twitched.

Suddenly he whipped about to us. "Gentlemen!" he cried. "Galleons—a fleet of old Spain! Four hundred years ago! Understand? And that sun—that sun—setting for us a second time!"

A thought seized me to which I found I could not give word. What—he could not mean that!

But it must be true. We all saw it. I was not mad. We were not all of us mad.

Movements on the decks of the nearest ship.

A flash. A loud *boom!*

The captain gave a shout.

"By heaven, they're firing on us!" To the officer of the deck: "Ronleigh, Ronleigh, sound general quarters. Get up the gunnery officer. Wheelsman, there! Hard right!"

The raucous, intermittent honking of the general alarm beat through the ship. The gun crews leaped for their guns. Came another clanging of hatch covers. The ammunition parties were at their posts. The gunnery officer appeared at the captain's elbow.

"You want me, captain?"

"How are your torpedoes?" came the quick, incisive demand.

"None with warheads on, sir. But—"

"Get your entire torpedo force on the job. Warheads on. Quick work now, Cowling! Tubes O. K.?"

"Yes, captain."

"Very well."

He turned to the executive officer, who was standing with one hand on a rung of the ladder leading to the fire control station just above.

"Fire control O. K.?"

"O. K., sir."

"Test out all circuits, and let me know when ready."

"Aye, aye, sir. We'll be ready to fire in two minutes, sir."

The captain nodded. "On the job! Action!"

THE captain was himself again.

It was his way. Stories had run much in the wardroom ever since I had been attached to the Shoshone. The captain had ever been this way. In athletics at the Academy—nervous, even frightened, befor the crack of the pistol. Then the coolest of the team, the cleanest fighter, the cleverest player, the gamest sportsman of the lot.

In wartime, the same. Nervous in convoy. Yet, when enemy craft were sighted—his destroyer had been the only one in the fleet to gain three gold stars. And now—no longer pale, no longer did his face twitch, no longer did he draw the deep inhalations that a tremulous body found vitally necessary. Cool, alert, concise. To use his own words—on the job.

Another series of flashes from the nearest galleon.

Boom!

More fountainlike splashes at our stern.

The captain chuckled.

"They can't gage our speed, poor devils. Lucky." He grinned at our open-eyed faces. "Even those shots would pierce our thin skin." He snapped at the wheelsman, "Head straight through them. Fifteen left. A touch more. There—there—s-t-e-a-d-y—right on. Mr. Ronleigh, keep her so. Pass the fifth ship in line just astern." He chuckled. "Give 'em a thrill. Don't want to use our fire unless I have to. Ready, though."

He was utterly transformed.

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How did he do it? I myself was still too overcome by the utter mystery of the situation really to come to normal perception of things about me. That first sunset—gleaming gold. Then three hours of clear-cut, moonless night. Then, as by a flash of lightning, a second day within the night. The sun, the same sun, riding low in the western heavens, going a second time to rest. A new day, a different day. And then this.

Had we actually been by some miraculous agency shunted four hundred years back into the past? Impossible! Such things were written about by highly strung imaginations. The imaginations for the greater part of temperamental individuals who had dedicated themselves to the study of social science, and in that study dreamed long and oft of Utopias, past, present and future, that would best suit their own peculiar idiosyncrasies. But as for really going back—impossible.

And yet here was our ship, a modern steel destroyer capable of express train speed and volcanic destruction, headed straight between two towering galleons of Old Spain in a day that should really be night! What did that mean?

Boom!

Again the flashing and the bellow of guns.

Again the high-fountained sea in our spreading wake. Ha! Speed. How could they, with those lumbering barges they called ships, judge our thirty knots and train their guns to hit? And yet, at that, I thanked the captain's judgment when he headed straight for the fleet, exposing naught but a knifelike bow to their fire.

We were almost upon the galleon fifth in line now. And on its towering poop, as high as our destroyer's bridge, climbed a man. He stood erect by the gilded and carven rail. Black-gowned, and shaven-headed—not a hundred feet away as we rushed by—he raised aloft a crucifix, shining gold in the setting sun. We passed with an echoing roar. The giant waves of our wake reached the galleon. She felt the sudden impulse and rolled. With a cry which we heard even above the droning roar of our engine room blowers, the priest fell into the sea, his symbol flashing on high, last to disappear beneath the heaving water.

Some fool at this moment pulled the siren cord, and with the wail of a devil the steam screamed forth. We could make out that men fell upon their knees on the Spaniard, while another priest in black robes rushed to the bulwarks and held aloft another thing that gleamed golden in the sun. The courage of faith!

Then: *Boom! Boom!*

Came a crash over head, then the creaking squeal of tortured timber, and in another moment the foremast raised havoc with the number three gun on the midships deck house.

"Wow!" the captain cried, his face lighting up. "This is good!"

I stared at him, and Professor Callieri, seeming well over whatever had rendered him unconscious in the radio shack when first the night had become day, gripped him by the sleve.

"*Dios!* Thee radio eet ees gone! *Capitàn,* do you not fight, sair? American do not run, sair!"

The captain looked down upon the little naturalized American.

"We have three guns left as a port broadside," he said with a smile. "They have twenty in each. At close range they could send us to the bottom inside of two minutes. At long range—" he shrugged his shoulders, "but we won't do that. Those poor devils—not a chance, not a chance. We'll go back, and try to make a truce—"

He broke off suddenly, his eyes to the westward. I followed his glance. All of us did, I think. The sun's rim was just touching the horizon. The ship rushed on; the galleon fleet, still flashing fire, fell back. A moment more and darkness fell as in sudden eclipse.

A gunner's mate stepped beside the captain, and saluted.

"Mr. Cowling reports six torpedoes ready in their tubes for action, sir."

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The captain started with a slight grunt.

"Humph! Good work. Report when all are ready. May not use 'em now, but tell Mr. Cowling to have 'em ready."

"Aye, aye, sir." The lad saluted and leaped away.

THE captain turned to me.

"That sun—another day—another age—I can't go back and destroy those ships. I can't. Not the game. Not sport."

Callieri broke in again.

"But, *capitàn,* they did shoot at you, sair. They haf break thees radio. They—"

"I know, I know, professor. But they're men from a different age. They don't know what or who we are. They don't know our power. Probably take us for some kind of a devil. Undoubtedly. Smoke, and all that. Too much advantage. And—" He looked about him with a peculiar light in his eyes which shone even in the darkness that now enveloped the bridge. "Who can tell? This came on us in a flash. Who can tell but that in another flash we'll be—back? And we can't destroy fellows like that. We don't belong. They are in the past—we—by accident— No. No. I'll go back shortly and we'll try to make a truce and find out. It's interesting, astonishingly interesting. But as to their destruction—no, no."

Callieri's face tightened.

"But, *capitàn,* they haf broke thee mast down by t'eir shot. They haf thus stop radio from all work, sair. Ees t'at not enough for make war upon t'em, sair? They shoot upon thee flag of my adopted countree, sair. They—"

The captain stopped him with an upraised hand.

"Professor, think a minute. Did they ever see that flag before? Remember, they're of the past. How, I don't know. But they're more mystified than we. We know what *we* are. We know what *they* are. They only know their own present, and we are of their future. A devil. A monster of the unknown seas. Remember those stories even the men with Columbus brought back? Monsters. They'll go home and tell 'em hair-raising tales of the sea monsters belching fire and smoke and rushing down upon them with the speed of wind, raising the sea in tidal waves with the tremendous whipping of their tails. You see, professor?"

Slowly the little Italian nodded. Yet I do not doubt that it was for the love of his adopted land, the country to which he had given his great radio secret, the life of his life, that he pleaded for vengeance upon the guns that had fired upon us. But the captain's point of view was right. We had to play the game. We were supermen. We were gods. We could forgive, we could be merciful—for we understood the condition, though the cause was yet enwrapped in mystery.

Callieri's hand shot out. "I would shake your hand, *capitàn,*" he said gravely.

And the captain as gravely took it in his own. "We will play the game," he repeated, quietly.

At that moment one of the crew stepped before me.

"Doctor! On the galley deck house, sir. Mr. Rowland! He was in the crow's nest for spotting if we fired. He's pretty badly—"

"*What!*" The captain turned upon the lad fiercely.

"Yes, sir. That's his G.Q. station, captain—in the crow's nest—for'ard spotter. And when the mast was shot down he—"

"Is he badly—"

"We just found him, sir, forgot all about him being there, heard him groan."

The old man swung upon me. "Doctor, get Rowland out of that. Get him out. By Heaven!" He turned to the galleon fleet just discernible in the gloom astern of us. "By Heaven! Young Rowland! If they—Wheelsman! Hard left! On the jump." He leaped from under the bridge overhead, and called up to the executive officer who had the fire control. "Get ready there!"

"Ready now, sir!"

Captain Williams' face was grim as I hurried away. Young Rowland with whom he played chess every evening after dinner, hurt. I well understood the old man's love

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for the lad. And when the foremast fell, young Rowland—medical officer though I be, I found myself shudder at the thought. Rowland, the life of the ship!

And the captain determined now to fight. Changed his mind. A clean sport—but young Rowland. Fight. Fight now. Revenge upon these fools of a bygone age. Revenge. A lesson.

I rushed to the youngster's side, and found that I had to cling hard to the rail of the ladder communicating with the gun deck of the galley deck house, for the Shoshone was heeled twenty degrees with the rudder hard aport. The captain was going back. No truce now. Fight. Fight. One against twelve. And fight.

Odds? Glorious!

CHAPTER V

Destruction

THE ship steadied as I reached Rowland. I knew that we then must be heading straight back for the galleon fleet. With my heart pounding with excitement, I leaned into the rushing wind and gazed ahead, trying to penetrate the darkness. The Spaniards were almost invisible in the sudden fall of night.

As I bent over my young friend a sputtering crackle reached my ears even over the roaring of the fire room blowers. Then came a glow of white light, and from forward shot out the long white finger of the searchlight, keenly penetrating the gloom before us in search of the craft that had lain the ship's favorite low.

No bones broken. A bruise, welling purple in the aura of radiance sent back by the intense light from the bridge overhead, showed on Rowland's left temple. With what little skill I possessed I determined to my own satisfaction that though the lad's skull might be fractured, it was not damaged to such an extent that the dear life within would find exit.

I breathed a sigh of relief. And yet the thing was dangerous enough. On the destroyer, if bad came to worse, there were no conveniences for proper surgery. We must wait until we reached port in the morning—then the naval hospital on the beach, and proper care and treatment. Silence, above all things. And absolute motionlessness. If only the old man would et these ghost galleons go and head straight back for—a terrifying thought struck me.

Go *back?*

Where?

Go back—to what place? We were not in the present. We were in the past. How, Heaven alone held that mystery. But four hundred years must lie between us and going back. But one thing to do—

Boom!

The man beneath my hand groaned, and I with him.

Shooting. Then I started. The ship had not trembled with that *"Boom!"* We had not fired. It was the fire of that ancient—

We hurried Rowland below to his stateroom and made him as comfortable as our small conveniences would permit. There was little I could do save bandage his head, and give him something that would keep him restful until we reached port.

Reached— I shook my head again, and gave utterance to a fervent oath. Would we ever reach the port we knew—Colon? And if we did reach the place where we had known Colon to be, would Colon yet be there? Four hundred years, and years are not miles. Time does not speed up.

Time, the mysterious, the unchangeable, the relentless, the absolute. Beginning—a brain stunning infinity of eons in the past. Continuing—a soul scourging infinity of infinities into the future. Coming from—going to—God alone knew; and I, in the then shriveled state of my own mind and soul, began to doubt that there was a God.

Time—time was the god. Time willed, and it was by Time's will that we, on a modern destroyer of the finest type, were even now speeding to give battle to a fleet of ships that had passed into oblivion four hundred years ere our own ship slid from the ways into the sea.

Boom!

Rowland had fallen under the power of

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the opiate, and I left him in charge of his Filipino boy and stumbled down the passageway into the wardroom—ghostly blue now, with the battle lamps close to the deck. I shuddered. Ghostly. Galleons. And the sun breaking out of the black night.

Even as I stepped upon the deck and turned for the ladder leading up to the bridge, the Shoshone heeled again. I dashed up. We were swinging to the right again, and a great galleon, crimson sailed, stood out like a bloody spectre in the piercing column of blinding white from the forward searchlight. Came a series of flashes from the galleon's bellied sides; deep-throated concussions; the awkward whish of their slow arching projectiles as they flew overhead.

The galleon was almost on our beam when the captain, who had been standing by one of the devices near the flag rail peering out to port, suddenly bent his head to the voice tube.

"Let go!"

Came a slight jerk under foot, followed by a gentle cough.

A curious trembling shook me as I peered out upon that ill-fated warrior of old Spain; a mingling of hope and horror. Then the thought of young Rowland suffering down below stiffened me.

Not five hundred yards were we when abeam of the crimson-sailed apparition of the past. And perhaps a minute passed from the time the shock of discharge came to us through the slender frame of the Shoshone.

Then the strange picture on the screen of the searchlight suddenly fell in upon itself. The great masts tottered, the decks upheaved, shattered fragments flew up to greet the drooping canvas. A great muffled roar—shivering deck—silence. And when the searchlight flashed out again, where the galleon had been—naught but the heaving sea.

"Next!"

The captain's order. Cool. Inexorable.

The white finger of the searchlight slid back and forth, dallying now and again as the electricians in charge thought they had located another of the doomed fleet, sweeping the sea in great horizon-paralleling paths. Then steadied. Shifted a bit to the right.

And another picture stood forth in the glare.

The rudder was put to right fifteen. Shortly afterward, back amidships; and we swept on broadside to the second galleon of the fleet. The roaring flashes of the ancient guns broke forth again, and the captain cursed.

"If they hit! If they hit! By Heaven, gentlemen— Hello, Hello, doctor! How's the boy?"

Even as he peered through the directing telescope, one hand reached out and clutched at my sleeve.

"As well as can be expected, captain. Of course there is danger of a fracture of the skull. He's quiet down below, sir."

AGAIN the old man swore a terrible oath.

"For that—it's for that I'm doing this. Hellish. Not sport. But they brought it upon themselves. We would have been friends. Investigation. For history. Photographs. Wonderful. But—Rowland—Rowland."

He suddenly leaned to the voice tube again.

"Let go!"

Another jerk underfoot, another muffled cough.

And in a minute more came a second detonation. The crimson sails of the second galleon folded in upon her like a shroud, and as though a giant hand had plucked her by the keel she went beneath the sea.

"Next!"

The captain's implacable word came clear and vengeful again.

Horrible! I thought to protest. This kind of warfare was not honorable. Murder. And yet they had fired upon us first. They had all but killed one of our company. They were firing even now, aiming, I suppose, for the source of the gleaming column of light. But, poor devils, little did they know what they were up against.

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"When the priest had given the final sacraments, he made exhortation that this demon be conquered by our guns. . . ."

Probably, as the old man had said, they thought us evil demons of the sea. That searchlight—I wondered what they thought of that. A giant, peering eye. The eye of a monster that was fed by the flames of its own vitals. The flame of hell itself. Awful—to them! Terrifying! Soul-searing! Worse than death. The eyes of a more horrible Satan than dwelt in the pit. And the brave priests, seeking to hold us back. Pitiful.

And yet—Rowland!

Awful. And if for some reason we could not—did not get back, back to our own times, our own century, then our very lives were dependent upon our making ourselves masters of the sea. Take what we could, make land somewhere—anywhere—while the fuel oil held out, and live as the people of that day lived.

As they lived?

Would we not be supermen even for the sixteenth century? But—what happened to supermen? Wizardry. The stake. Unless they fell in with the priestcraft—wizardry. Inquisition. The fiery stake.

Or—perhaps the ally of kings. Who could tell? Torture, or preeminence. Who could tell?

Three more galleons found their last harborage on the bottom of the Caribbean, in rapid succession. Then came a miss.

The captain swore again. Quickly calmed. "Six torpedoes left. And seven ships."

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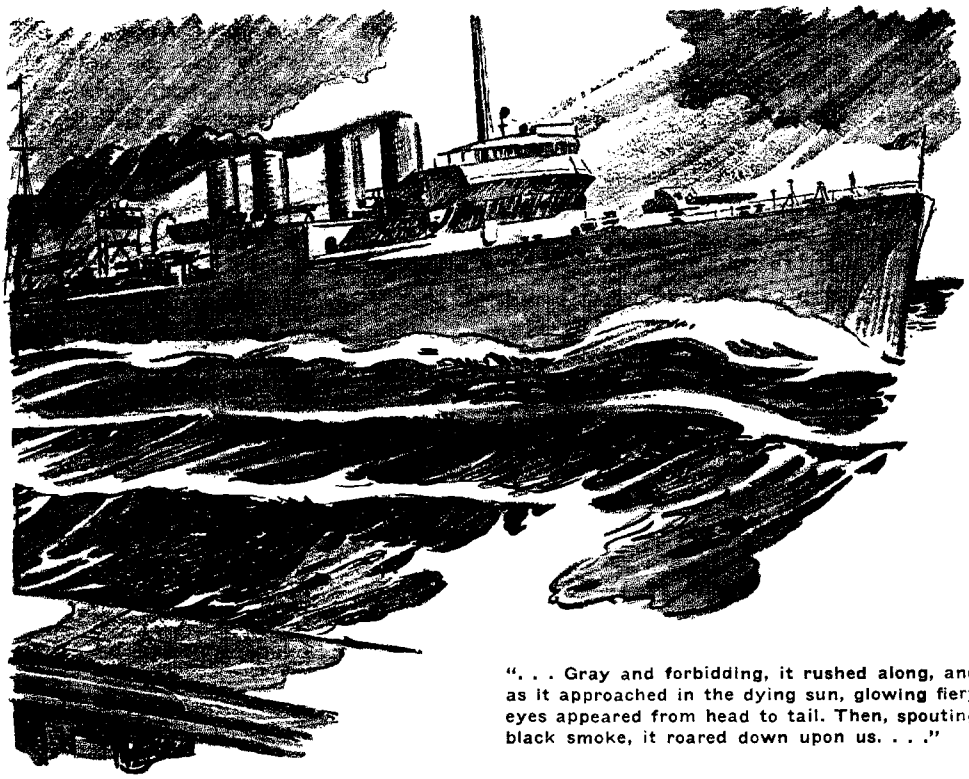

". . . Gray and forbidding, it rushed along, and as it approached in the dying sun, glowing fiery eyes appeared from head to tail. Then, spouting black smoke, it roared down upon us. . . ."

The officer of the deck spoke up. "Shall I go about, sir?"

"No, Ronleigh." The skipper gave a short, dry cough. "If the Lord has seen fit to save that ship, we won't interfere. There are still six of them ahead."

A hail from fire control.

"Picked up another, captain." The exec's voice came pleadingly. "Can't I try my four-inch out, captain?"

"No, no." He turned to the wheelsman: "Make the same approach."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Manson!"

The chief quartermaster jumped before the captain.

"Take the wheel. Come about."

The old man stepped back from under the overhead of the bridge.

"Fire control."

The executive officer's round face showed over the rail above. "Sir?"

"Get that searchlight on the ship we missed. No. 3 four-inch still out of commission?"

"Both telescopes smashed, and the sight bar bent, sir. Can use the port battery best. Three guns there, captain." The exec's voice was hoarsely plaintive. "You goin' to get that last ship?"

The captain shook his head.

"It depends," he replied enigmatically. "Port side, eh? Get it ready."

The exec's voice still held the same note. "Been ready for two hours, captain."

The captain's face softened with a flickering smile as he noted the protest in his mate's tones. And I could sense the exec's disappointment that only torpedoes had come into the game so far.

"On the job!" cried the old man. "Cut down all crews to the limit, and prepare a boarding party."

"A *boarding party!* Aye, aye, sir!" Lieutenant Wilson's voice trembled with eagerness.

WE COULD hear his snapped orders to the man at the voice tubes leading to the guns. Then the repeats at the tubes

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themselves. A man was sent down to the gunnery officer. Sounds of cheering. A clanking of the steel door of the rifle locker on deck. I saw three men sitting a Lewis gun on its mount between the bridge and the galley deck-house, ready to sweep the decks of a closing ship.

Boarding party!

No wonder the old man had called the chief quartermaster to the wheel. Always did when a ticklish landing was to be made. Had him there when we came through the canal the last time. Three weeks—or was it four hundred years yet to come? By Heaven, the mystery of it. Four hundred years! How? Why?

A hail came from overhead.

"Right on, sir. Shall we fire when we get the range, captain?"

The exec was itching to use his guns. His voice again betrayed him.

The captain shook his head.

"Break out the after-searchlight. Steady both on. Let go a half dozen illumination shells. Give 'em a real scare. If they don't fire, Mr. Wilson, stand by to board."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The sharp crack of the stubby anti-aircraft just forward of the bridge rang out. Shortly came a dull report from the distance, and a dazzling white glow filled the sky just above the last galleon.

Boom!

The ancient guns replied.

"Good range with the A A!" cried the captain. "Keep it up. I don't want to send this one to the bottom of the sea. Scare 'em, put the fear of hell into 'em. It's what I want and they need, if they only knew it. We'll get 'em that way. That's the dope. That's the dope! Keep it up. Now both searchlights out. On again. Out again. That's it. Blink our eyes, hang 'em. Blinkin' the sea devil's eyes. The hair's pricklin' on 'em now. More star shells. Light from heaven fallin' on them. Light from heaven.

"Why in the name of decency didn't I think of that in the first place? Keep it up. Good. Good. Stopped firing—they've quit it. All up with 'em now. Devil of the sea's got 'em, and heaven's with the devil for once. Ha! Avaunt! Avaunt! Won't do any good. Heaven and the devil of the sea—by Heaven, if young Rowland goes under he's been avenged. Hard right, there, chief! Ease her—ease her. Steady. Good. Hold her so."

The captain leaped to the engine room telegraphs, and brought the engines to one-third. The roar of the forced draft blowers sank to a sullen drone. Silence.

"Searchlights on, fore and aft!"

The galleon, not three ship lengths on the port bow, stood out in the ensuing glare.

"Ronleigh!"

"Sir?"

"Take the annunciators."

The officer of the deck, alert, his head cocked toward the old man, seized the levers of the telegraphs.

"Wilson!"

The round face appeared over the rail again.

"Secure fire control temporarily. Come down. Ready boarding party. Ten degrees left, chief."

The captain was leaning over the port wing of the bridge staring over at the galleon. Members of her crew could be seen upon their knees. The sound of a solemn chant drifted to us. Once a long, high-pitched scream, that most terrifying sound, the scream of a man when in the torment of a paralyzing fear. A black figure arose on the galleon's high poop, in his outstretched hand a glowing crucifix. His deep-throated voice boomed across to us. He made the sign of the cross.

Some one muttered on our own bridge, and repeated the sign.

The captain tore out his handkerchief and waved it at the priest. The latter shifted slightly beside the carven rail, and raised his symbol on high.

"Megaphone!"

The captain snatched it from my hand.

"*Amigo!*" he cried as he held it to his lips. Then in his academy Spanish, a sentence or two.

An amazed look came into the priest's face. Slowly his arm descended.

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The chanting arose closer in the great deep-bellied ship.

Again the old man cried that he would be their friend. Then: "Stop both engines!"

Ronleigh, at the telegraphs, arched his levers, and brought both at "Stop." The engine's throb ceased. The blowers died away. We slid upon the galleon in silence.

"Amigo!" the captain cried again.

A man in resplendent trappings sprang beside the priest. The captain waved his handkerchief again. The Spaniard raised his arms, the palms of his hands toward us. The captain nodded and waved a hand, palm out.

Then swung to the chief at the wheel. "Twenty-five left!"

Then to Ronleigh: "Back full, both!"

The slim Shoshone shuddered throughout her entire length. The churning of the great wheels as they beat with the power of thirty thousand horses to bring the destroyer to a dead stop echoed from the galleon's bulging flanks. The old man's seamanship had ever been of the best. Our nose was against the galleon's side, our stern swung in as the propellers flung the sea against the hard left rudder.

"Stop both. Away the boarding party!" the captain shouted.

And in a moment more, armed to the teeth, our men were scrambling up the great vessel's rounded sides.

CHAPTER VI

TREASURE

I'LL admit I was not far behind the exec when he finally leaped, panting and with his automatic ready in hand, upon the decks of that ancient ship.

And the first man to confront us was the priest again.

"Amigo! Amigo!" I cried.

The man stared. Then his glance swept about the decks. They were bare—not a man in sight. The crew had evidently fled in terror.

Our own men scattered, in accordance with the prearranged design.

I approached the priest, my automatic dangling from my left hand, my right extended in what I meant to be friendly greeting. He made again the sign of the cross, and muttered some words which I thought to be Latin. Following him, and though not of the Catholic faith myself, I, too, made the sign. The man stared dumbly. I repeated it, and recalling a Spanish exclamation I had often heard in Colon, cried:

"Salvagame Dios!" And I half knelt before him as I uttered the words.

With a sudden cry the priest stepped to me. I seized his hand and wrung it heartily. Poor fellow—the fear that shone in his eyes in the wide-focused glare of the two searchlights that was upon us! Crossing myself once more, I cried again the same words:

"Salvagame Dios—God save me!"

"Dondes es el capitàn?"

Startled, I swung about.

It was our own skipper.

The priest nodded toward the poop.

"Gracias," thanked the captain softly, and bowed. "Come with me, Medico."

I obeyed with alacrity. This was something to see. A Spanish galleon of the sixteenth century—ancient, and yet—of the day in which we now lived—seemed to live—four hundred years. I shook my head. We were here, that was all I could think. On a full-equipped Spanish galleon, on the Caribbean Sea, one hundred and sixty miles from the Isthmus of Panama—from the canal. From the canal? This—we *must* be in the sixteenth century! And the canal—four centuries before it was even dreamed. Good heavens! Would we get back? Would some similar cataclysmic convulsion of the god Time send us back to our own day as it had precipitated us into this?

The priest led the way.

Beneath the poop we followed him.

And I snatched down the hand of a gorgeously clad officer who was in the act of blowing out his brains.

"No, no. *Amigos!"* I pointed to the captain and myself. *"Amigos."*

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The curious fashioned pistol dropped to the floor. The proud Castillian features of the officer clouded with grief. He fell upon a bench by the brocaded table and buried his face in his arms. In pity for him I touched his shoulder. He jerked up, his face aflame.

"Amigo," I repeated, indicating the captain. *"Es mi capitàn. Amigo.* Friend."

The man stood erect and bowed his head.

The old man started a flood of his Spanish. Another silken officer entered the cabin. Three more. They stared at us with wide eyes, listening to the captain's attempts to make them understand, and glancing at each other as in utter mystification.

Then suddenly the priest spoke. Those priests! They had the courage in those days.

The captain motioned him to go slower. Then answered.

The priest nodded quickly, his alert black eyes snapping.

The captain turned to me, wrinkling his brows.

"They want to know what we did to the other ships. They could see the flash in the darkness, he says, and the collapse of each galleon under the play of our searchlight, and thought that the glaring beam did the thing. What in the devil will I tell 'em? Got to make it as easy as we can, for the priest says they're bent on suicide—could never return to Spain in such disgrace. What'll I say, Medico?"

"Why, tell 'em the truth, captain. That we're men from the future, come back to give them a glimpse of what is to be, and—"

"Good, good!"

And turning to the Spaniards he broke into his modern version of their language again. I watched their faces in the strong light that entered through the great window-like ports facing our own ship. The sorrow gradually fell away, the deep lines of disgrace smoothed from their foreheads. Took their place a look of bewilderment, of mystification again. They glanced at each other as though they could not believe their ears, and I could not in my heart blame them. Then the priest interrupted with one soft question. The old man thought a moment, then turned to me once more.

The one whom you prevented from blowing out his brains is the vice admiral of this fleet. The others are the ship's officers, and one or two of his staff. They are all firm in that they cannot return to Spain. And they ask if we will take them with us."

That was a poser.

Take them with us!

Into the future? That was their only escape.

Or—a new idea came. This was some time in the sixteenth century. Now—to make sure. A good chance.

"Ask them what year this really is, captain."

The answer came quickly.

"Fifteen hundred and sixty-four. Holy Moses! And we're in it!" The captain's own face showed plainly his wonder, set at last.

He seized the arm of the priest.

"Es verdad? The truth? *Verdad?"*

The black-robed man stared. One of the officers went to a sort of cupboard built against the bulkhead and fetched back a crudely bound book that would have given ecstasy to a collector of our own day. He opened this before the priest, and spoke a sentence or two. Rapidly the priest slipped over the pages, and held out the thing to us.

The captain took it from his hand.

"The ship's log," he exclaimed. "By Jove!"

The priest pointed with a lean white finger.

And in Arabic numerals I read the date of the last entry:

3 de anero de 1564.

THE captain's eye met mine. In silence he returned the book with a nod, then quite suddenly sat him down on the bench.

The priest stepped quickly beside him, dropping a hand upon his shoulder. And

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the captain, with all of us looking on in astonishment, reached up and seized it in his own.

Voices from outside.

The exec entered, glancing at us strangely. I indicated the man whom first I had seen.

"The vice admiral," I said.

Wilson looked at me, startled, then bowed gravely. Suddenly I must have recollected that a vice admiral is a great naval officer in any age, stiffened erect, and saluted. The Spaniard's face tightened. Then the vice admiral returned the bow.

"Captain," I went on, breaking the awkward silence that followed, "bad as it seems, we really are bumped back into 1564. In that case something will probably knock us back into our own time again. These fellows say they can't go home, and want us to take them somewhere. Why not put a line on 'em, and get 'em back to Colon? Think what it would mean for our own year, and for the historians, to have them—"

The executive officer broke in:

"Wait a minute, doc! Captain, I came to tell you that there are English prisoners on board this ship."

"What?"

Wilson nodded.

"Yes, sir. Our men found 'em rotting in chains down in a black hole in the fore part of the galleon. English."

The old man's eyes snapped dangerously. I wondered if at that time, too, he did not think of young Rowland.

"English, by Heaven!" He paused a moment. "Taking 'em back for a little inquisition, eh?" His fist came down on the table with a crash. "That settles it! We did right. Get a tow line out and we'll take the outfit back to the canal. Detail a party of fifteen men and one officer to take charge here. We'll take the Englishmen aboard the Shoshone. That settles it. Anything else?"

For Lieutenant Wilson made no move to depart.

"The professor came aboard snoopin' around, captain. He's right outside, wants to speak to you, but I stopped him, not knowing what was going on in here."

"Send him in."

The exec left to carry out the captain's orders, and Callieri appeared. He showed no trace of his recent indisposition, and his eyes sparkled with a new excitement.

He bowed to all in the room, and his glance lingered upon the silken draperies of the room, and the rich furnishings of plate and tapestry.

Then he slipped to the captain's side.

"We are worth a meellion dollars, every mans, *capitàn,*" he whispered softly, looking up into Commander Williams's eyes with a crafty wink. "I haf talk Spanish to one of t'ee sailors of t'ees sheep, an' eet ees *wan* sheep t'at carry mos' treasure!"

Treasure!

The captain's eyes met mine again.

Then glancing down at the professor he slowly shook his head and smiled.

"We are taking this ship back to Colon, Professor Callieri. The authorities shall decide about that treasure. And in my opinion the English prisoners aboard here are most entitled to what there may be. The stuff was mighty likely taken from them in the first place."

We waved the little man aside, and swung back to the Spaniards, exploding into violent speech.

Shortly the priest replied. Then all bowed, and we left.

A detail of five men was sent to the cabin to guard the officers and prevent any possibility of the thing we feared most—suicide.

The crew of the galleon had all been brought topside and lined up in the waist, disarmed and disconsolate and most pathetic in their abject fear. Devils to them we must have been. The chief bosun's mate was in charge of them, and he had sent over to the Shoshone for a Spanish dictionary, and with the help of the yeoman was rapidly turning its pages in search of illuminating words that would give him something to say. It is strange how even in the most grave circumstances a thing will strike a man as humorous.

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The chief was so solemn in his efforts to bring about an understanding. His brow was wrinkled in perplexity. His great hand almost hid the stubby pencil with which he was attempting a full sentence on the envelope on the dictionary's page, and his eye rolled so comically as he read his effort to the assembled sailors. Meaningless to them, of course—but he could not quite understand their dumb stare when he had finished.

He broke into the most atrocious denunciation of a type of misbegotten cavemen who could not even understand their own language. He raved—in glorious, futuristic English. The Spaniards crossed themselves, and one fell upon the deck and groveled.

While I, in hysterical reaction I suppose, found myself behind the great mainmast, undoubtedly purple, and cackling in a high-pitched soprano that I could not control.

Then I heard an exclamation in peculiar English, followed by a short chuckle, a weary attempt at laughter that somehow thrilled me. Turning, I beheld five tattered and unshaven individuals sitting weakly against the port bulwarks.

The English prisoners we had miraculously delivered from the torture and death that had surely been their doom!

Sobering instantly, I stepped over to them and held out my hand.

"I am glad we came in time," I said.

The tallest of them, a man who must have been of extraordinary physical powers before the emaciation of his imprisonment had withered his body, seized my hand and shook it English fashion.

"God or fiend," he cried huskily, "to you are we grateful!"

"We are neither gods nor fiends," I returned. "We are even as you—men. And why we are here, or how, is as much mystery to us as our presence here must be to you."

HIS keen eyes watched me as I spoke. Slowly he shook his head.

"It is in the hands of God, fair sir, as are all things. I for one cannot believe that you come emissary of the evil one. But—" His eyes roved over to the brightly lit destroyer. "But, in God's name, whence do you come?"

I swept my hand toward the Shoshone.

"From the future—" I began.

But his hand seized mine convulsively again.

"But you speak my own tongue, albeit somewhat strangely. You are English!"

Shaking my head gravely I told him that we were not of his land, but of a people related in blood and tongue, now dwelling in a great country to the north.

"And in a great war of our times," I went on, "my own land and that which is yours grown older, yet even more powerful, were allied in the cause of democracy."

His eyes widened.

"Democracy? 'Tis a strange word, and savoreth to my mind of certain ungodly politics of the ancient Greek. Has Greece, then, returned to her old prominence in this growing world, and again attempting to elevate the peasantry to a position they cannot hold?"

I shook my head.

"The ancient Greece is long gone," I answered. "And yet the modern Greece fought with us. Our cause was not that of a single nation, my friend. We fought for the liberty and happiness of all mankind."

His eyes flashed to his fellows. Then returning, searched my face.

"Truly is the world upside down, fair deliverer. *We* fought for the queen."

There was haughtiness in his tone and words.

"In our day," I smiled, "the people are king."

His brows wrinkled in perplexity. He drew himself up with an arrogance that touched my sense of humor again, and opened his mouth as though in scorn. Then came the sputtering roar of an escape valve from the Shoshone, and to his eyes shot utter mystification once more. Slowly his glance roved over the destroyer, then quite suddenly fixed upon the bosun's mate, who was still attempting, dictionary

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in hand, to illuminate the minds of the Spanish crew as our glaring searchlights brought their bodies into the light of day.

"'Tis black magic, and I understand not. The future you say you come from, and yet you know not how you came, or why. You say that you are of a new land and kin to my own, and yet that the people are king. And in fighting for the people, who are king, you say that you fight for this dream of ancient Greece, this insidious outrage they called democracy. Against whom, then, if not against another king—who could not well be if what you say be sooth—did you take arms?"

I could think of no other answer to his question than one which I felt he would best understand.

"We fought, England and we, against the Powers of Darkness."

He fell back a step.

"Truly, then, you are in league with God."

I nodded and told the truth.

"We know more of God than did your day. And understand more His powers, using them in that greater knowledge."

A gasp from all five. I wondered if I had uttered blasphemy. The man before me, who seemed to be of higher rank than his comrades, stared in silence for a moment. Then stepped closer to me.

"Art thou priest, then? And all with you?"

"I am a doctor," I replied.

He fell back again, as though my touch might contaminate.

"A chirurgeon! Nay, jest not. No doctor has knowledge of God. Yet that fellow there"—he indicated the bosun's mate—"he readeth from a book. He, then, is a priest."

I explained as best I could that all men of our day could read, and that all men, though not priests, had come to a greater and more intimate comprehension of the powers of God. But I could not make him understand, and shortly, when Lieutenant Wilson called me aft, I bowed and left them in their bewilderment.

The captain, it seemed, was in a deuced hurry to get away. He had decided, the exec informed me, not only to take the English on board the destroyer, but also the treasure the galleon carried. And this latter, our men, with the aid of some Spanish who had found themselves able to move, were bringing up from below and storing in the forward magazine of the Shoshone. One small chest had been opened on deck, and about it were gathered the gunnery officer, the engineer, and a number of the men.

It was full to the brim with virgin gold. Cowling was on his knees before it, running his hands through the coarse grains of the stuff as a man might in sifting wheat. I myself—I could not resist—had scooped up a handful of the heavy stuff, roughly calculating its value. The one chest alone would have made a third of our crew happily independent. How it glistened when the beams of the searchlight lingered upon it as the crowd about shifted and bent! The little professor was right: we could well be worth a "meellion each mans!"

"HOW many chests are there?"

"In all there are fourteen like this," breathed Cowling with a sigh. "And a round dozen filled with bars of silver."

Millions! Millions!

And ours, every bar of silver, every grain of gold.

In sudden thought I called to the tall Englishman:

"Where did this gold come from? From what land?"

He drew himself up.

"These cursed Spaniards may lie, but I do not. The Spaniards took the gold from us."

"From you!—The captain had probably been right in his conjecture. "Then—but from what land did *it* originally come?"

"That I do not know in sooth," haughtily. "We stoop not to take it from the soil ourselves. We gained possession of the gold—from others."

I jumped. He had taken it from the

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Spanish in the first case! I stared at him in amazement, all the stories of my boyhood coming in a rush.

"You are a pirate?"

His eyes flashed. "I seized it for my queen."

Ha! Buccaneering for deft-conscienced Elizabeth. Little difference, thought I, though I kept the notion to myself.

It took well over half an hour to store the stuff in the magazine. And by that time the towlines had been lead out and all was ready for our return—if indeed we could return.

The English demurred somewhat at going aboard the fire devil that our destroyer must have seemed, but were prevailed upon to accept our hospitality by the captain, who told them that he would explain the modern mysteries of the Shoshone to them, and also that they were to have their share of the gold. Quickly, at that last, did they appear to forget that they had taken it for their queen.

And somewhat after midnight we cast off the mooring lines, and started at dead slow until the towline began to take up a strain. Then we came to standard speed of ten knots.

We figured that when we had sent that last message to the squadron commander, our distance from Colon was approximately one hundred and sixty miles. Following the Spaniard fleet might have added twenty more. Hence, we should make port by three in the afternoon, instead of the anticipated eight in the morning.

Three in the afternoon, I had better say, by our own clocks. If—and Heaven forbid that such a thing should come to pass—if we continued to remain in the year of 1564, with the three-hour difference in time of sunset, then we would reach Colon by high noon.

And reaching Colon—I confess I have dreamed of leaving the sea were fortune ever to come my way—the treasure stored below would in some part surely come to us. Then—gold, and silver, and a little home in a nook in the hills back of the bay at home. Life again with my wife. And the youngster, cutting his teeth the last time I had seen him a year and a half ago.

The romance of it! Building a home with pirate gold. Chests of it! Gold. Silver! Even now, on our own ship, pirate treasure. Ours!

CHAPTER VII

BLACK MAGIC

WHEN day came at last, young Rowland was out of danger.

And the captain was happy. Yet underneath his outward show of gayety was something else. This I could not entirely understand. But as we gathered at the table for breakfast, with our English guests, I thought I discovered the trouble.

He was grieving over the sinking of eleven galleons. Grieving that his own sorrow and rage at the hurt the Spaniards did Rowland had so taken him by force. Grieving, and yet—wondering, too.

I confess that I also had wondered much as I tried to sleep during the dark hours after we got under way. I could yet see the great galleon in the glare of the after searchlight's relentless eye and at the end of our steel wire tow. I could not understand how the thing had come to pass. I could hardly believe as I lay in my bunk that conditions were actually as they were. Time and time again I arose, and, donning a bathrobe, climbed up on deck and looked astern of us for the concrete proof. Each time I felt my heart beat hard again. The galleon was there, still there—it was not a dream. We men of the "present" were thrust back into the past.

It was true. It was awful to contemplate, hard to accept—but it was true. The deck force was repairing our foremast—shot down. And there rode the last of the twelve galleons in the fleet we had sent to the bottom of the sea.

The treasure was in our hold!

The English prisoners were eating breakfast with me now!

And Colon—Colon was ahead of us now.

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A few hours more, four hours more when the sun reached its height—when the sun reached its height?

Hold on. I gripped myself. That would mean that we were still under the influence of the thing, that had sent us into the past. That would mean that if we came to land at all, Colon—as we knew it—would not be there—non-existent! Then what we do? What *could* we do? How long would this condition last?

Were we forever to remain in the past? Were we from now on to take up life from the year 1564 and go on, living a strange and perhaps horribly uncertain life in the day of our ancestors—centuries before our own grandfathers were born on earth? What—my heart beat unsteadily as I watched the Englishman awkwardly attempt manipulation of their forks.

Forks! We lived in a time when a fork was not invented. A little thing, a fork. And yet—idiocy! I gripped myself again.

And Colon—the canal—not yet a thing of life!

I showed the Englishmen over the ship in the broad light of day. And truly I think they believed themselves bewitched. The glances they continually cast back upon the galleon following in our wake! The fearful manner in which they touched each new miracle—the simplest contrivances on deck!

At breakfast—the forks. Their childish surprise when we gave them coffee.

"Coffee!"

One of them exclaimed aloud; he had tasted the stuff in the land of the infidel Turk.

The glances they cast at each other! These demons of the future, these devils of the unknown seas—ate food and drank—coffee!

How they exclaimed even to see us light a cigarette. Then the pleasure that overcame their consternation when we prevailed upon them each to try one. More. And more!

On deck. The torpedo tubes—we had to show them prints of the torpedos themselves. How they shuddered in horror, and yet aroused to enthusiasm when we told them of their destructive power, and related how we had sunk eleven of the galleons with one torpedo each. Oh; yes, they had heard and felt the muffled detonations in their black hole below. How they shuddered again when we related how their ship had been saved by accident.

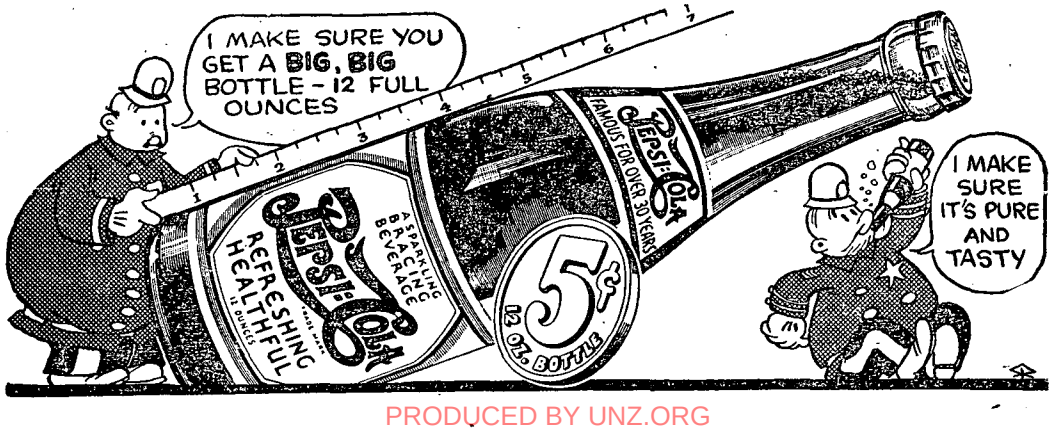
"The will of the good God!" they exclaimed.

I bowed my head. Perhaps it was. I wondered if it were by the will of God that we had been thus cast back into the past. I wondered. The great god—*Time*.

The engines—afraid to touch them. Carefully we explained. Showed them a coffeepot in the wardroom pantry. Let them see the lifting of the cover as the water boiled—Watt-like. They shook their heads—they could not understand.

Electric lights. How they marveled!

And leaped back at a slight shock we


I MAKE SURE YOU GET A BIG, BIG BOTTLE - 12 FULL OUNCES
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were able to give them, by the touch of a cigar lighter the black gang had rigged in the engine room. Magic! Black magic!

Like children. Then again like the men they must have been when they trod their own decks.

Officers all, and titled. I tried to explain to them our own system of examination for commission in our own navy. What? We were of the commons? Of the mass? Peasantry?

Unbelievable!

Yet, and I do not think it was entirely fancy on my part, I swear I detected a certain condescension toward us, despite their obvious awe, from then on. Poor devils!

The little suns? What were they? In the night they had made the galleon stand out as at noon of a brilliant day.

We showed them the searchlights; they fell back before the sputtering hiss as our electrician sent the current through the carbons. Little suns! Black magic!

I shuddered—that second setting of the sun, only the night before. It already seemed a month, an age. Four hundred years—four centuries back. Would the next setting of the sun find us still in mystery? Or—

And Colon. An hour more now, and we were due to raise land in the east. What would these sixteenth century Englishmen say of our canal? Or—would the canal be there? That was not yet even a dream. That was of the future. So were we. But somehow, in some way, good or evil—in our own past! With the blood, Heaven knows, of some of these very Englishmen in our own veins!

The compass! Yes, they knew what a compass did. But such a compass!

NOON came, and still they marveled. Still the condescension. And yet, also, still the awe, the reverence, the bewilderment.

Pathetic, tragic, comical—terrible. For them. And for us.

A bell rang on the bridge.

They stared in dumb astonishment as the officer of the deck sprang to the voice tube from the crow's nest.

"Land, ho!"

"Where away?"

"Dead ahead, sir."

The executive, in his capacity of navigator, nodded to the captain. I fancied he breathed a sigh of relief. I know that I did. At least, the land was where it ought to be. And sighted when expected. Land!

By the sun—high noon.

But by our ship's clocks—unchanged to suit the new condition of the great white orb overhead—three o'clock in the afternoon.

Gradually the land rose to the east. Familiar, yet strange.

Binoculars, a long glass. Colon was not within our view. The executive took bearings upon prominent landmarks that showed above the monotony of the greening coastline.

Turned an amazed face to the captain.

"This mountain, and that, correspond with our charts, captain. Between them ought to be Colon. It isn't there."

We stared at the land.

We turned and saw the great galleon at the end of our steel wire.

We were within a mile of the beach. A signal fluttered to our foreyard. A man appeared in the towering bows of the galleon. Semaphore messages whipped back and forth. The man disappeared.

"Stop both!" the captain snapped.

The roar of the blowers diminished to a low drone. The English stared. Mystery again.

The fo'c'sle gang were ready forward. The bosun's mate had the anchor bar under the fluke. The captain watched the galleon as it drifted on. A splash under her bows.

"They've cast the towline adrift, captain!" cried the officer of the deck.

"On the job," returned the old man laconically.

A greater splash.

"Galleon's anchored, sir," came the report.

"Very well."

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The skipper leaned over the rail in the port wing of the bridge. The Englishmen stared with him. The way of the Shoshone was almost stopped. The after-gang were bending a heavy Manila mooring line to the eye in the steel hawser, preparatory to taking it to the anchor engine to haul in.

"Dead in the water, sir!" cried the leadsman from below.

The captain waved his hands to the fo'c'sle. "Let's go!"

The bosun's mate gave a great heave on the anchor bar, and with a rattling roar that set the ship a-shivering the chain leaped and jerked from below.

No word was spoken for some moments.

The officer of the deck made his noon reports, doubtfully.

"Twelve o'clock, sir—by the sun. Chronometers wound."

"Very well."

Nothing else.

We all stood and stared.

The general appearance of the land was the same as we had seen it when we left Colon two days before. The low, palm-fringed, white beach. The rising hills to right and left. The same indentations in the coast line. The same. There could be no doubt of that. And yet—not the same.

Time!

Four centuries were yet to pass before we might recognize all, and feel certain of ourselves again. Some one suggested that we leave the galleon and coast up and down the shore a bit. No answer was vouchsafed him. We knew where we were—geographically. We knew where we were—chronologically. But somehow we were in between. And the great god Time had played us a horrible trick.

One of the Englishmen suddenly pointed. "Darien! The Spaniard stronghold of these seas. Darien!"

We had known that. But the words did not arouse any enthusiasm. Darien—and four centuries later, Colon. Outcasts from our own land, our own civilization, our own time. God!

Came a sudden heart-jerking and nerve-rending crash from below.

The next second the sun blazed in our faces, mid-low in the western sky! A loud cry came from the fo'c'sle.

"Colon!"

We stared aghast. It was the change.

The land before us—Colon! We were back. By what marvelous accident, we did not know. But the sun had been jerked from directly above our heads to mid-afternoon, and the green land had given way to the white city, lying low before us.

Another exclamation. "Great Heavens! The galleon—"

I swung about, still stunned. The Spanish galleon had disappeared. A man called down in a high-pitched voice from the fire control platform.

"There are men struggling in the water where the galleon lay, sir!"

A sudden light came into the captain's eyes.

"Great God! It must be—must be *our own men.* On the jump, there! Save those men!"

THE motor sailer was hanging ready from the davits, a foot from the water, the smoke of its engine drifting up to the deck. Men tumbled into it. The boat shoved off.

In sudden recollection I dashed around the bridge.

Then to the captain: "Captain! The Englishmen—"

He nodded, looking me straight in the eye.

"Gone! Probably struggling in these very waters, four centuries ago, as our men are out there now where the galleon was anchored."

I stared at him.

A swift boat was running toward us from the beach.

Professor Callieri stumbled breathlessly up the ladder.

"It works! It works! I deescover what the trouble ees, an' thee radio ees now in condeetion. Eet ees what I t'ink make us go back to year fifteen-sixty-four. Las' night I t'ink try my cool wave once more, an' I make circuit t'ees time in wrong man-

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nair. Then shock—Like t'at—*shock!* Doctor, he fin' me, shock. Las' night, he fin' me like t'at. Jus' now I go down again, because mast is raise again, an' radio wire O. K. Once more I try. Bang! Whish! Thee sun fall, thee galleon deesappear, thee Anglishmans—" The little professor threw up his hands expressively— "an' we haf come back to our own time, wit' thee United States of America to use thee Callieri Cool Wave for efer and for efer now. *Dios*, what a frightfulness t'at was!"

At last I had awakened.

The radio! I had not thought of that. The radio—and Callieri's request last night to go below and attempt something in the way of a combination of his cool wave and the ordinary waves. That was what did it!

Electric waves in the ether. The theory of vibration. Something had gone wrong, as the professor said. Some peculiar vibration had suddenly seized upon the ship, and we had been sent in the flash of an instant and with the speed of light, into the past. Radio—the fourth dimension—the theory of vibration.

I shuddered. Suppose we had not gotten *back*.

I looked about me. All seemed a dream. Yet above our heads was the patched foremast. And here, the men who had been on the galleon.

"We anchored, sir, according to signal. It was noon; the sun at meridian. The next thing we knew, we were struggling in the water, the galleon vanished from about us, the sun hanging at mid-afternoon. That is all I can say, captain. We were on the Spanish ship, then it was gone and we were in the water." The man wiped beads from his forehead that were not salt water of the sea. "Whew! It's all I want of that!"

We quite agreed. And we wondered what the thoughts of the five Englishmen had been, going through the same experience almost four hundred years ago. Magic! Black magic!

Callieri suddenly gripped my arm, with a cry of delight.

"Thee treasure—thee *treasure*. Eet mus' have fallen like thee Anglishmans. An' eef it deed so fall, t'en—"

"By Heaven!" cried the skipper. "Then it's still on the bottom of the seas beneath our very decks!"

But the search for that is another story. We were thankful enough just then that we had returned.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GREAT GOD TIME

THAT was the story that Lieutenant Graham Hardwick, Medical Corps, United States Navy, told me. Brief enough it was, but the doctor was still laboring under the awe of the thing, and there were many details undoubtedly omitted that would have made interesting reading. But I dared not question the lieutenant too deeply. Indeed, he and every other man of the Shoshone were ill with what seemed a peculiar nervous condition somewhat similar to shell-shock for a space of three weeks after their miraculous appearance lying at anchor in the harbor of Colon.

I leave to your imagination the astonishment on board the flagship, when a man came rushing into the radio shack where the squadron commander and the radio officer were awaiting some word of the lost Shoshone.

"Captain! Captain! She's *back!*"

How the squadron commander and others there had jumped outside, and beheld the Shoshone lying peacefully at anchor. Lying there at anchor, when no man could be found who had seen the ship come up over the horizon, although a hundred were on watch! Lying there at anchor, although no man in the crowded harbor had seen the ship come in!

The mate of a banana boat, with his eyes starting from their sockets, came rowing madly over to the flag.

"I was looking at the very spot! The very spot, captain. Clear as day, with the sun shinin' bright. Lookin' right at the spot—and nothin' was there. Not a thing. Nothin'! I was lookin' right there, sir,

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kinda at nothin', jest a dreamin' an' a gazin'. The next thing I knowed, why there was the Shoshone, anchored!"

I swear I would not anticipate such an experience with any great degree of joy. And yet I would that I had been on the Shoshone when she made that short day's cruise into the past. Few men have done that and fetched back the proof. What a memory to have! What tales to tell! What a glorious thing to have lived in a day four centuries back. I envy every man of them. And yet if the opportunity should come my way I would think twice before I seized it!

AFTER WORD

WITH a purpose in mind I withheld part of the ancient pen-written manuscript of Francisco Vedugo de Coloma, and bearing a date just three months and nine days from that we saw in the galleon's log—the date the doctor had seen.

Just a sentence or two it is, but pertinent. A point of view it gives—the idea the writer held regarding the story of the returned galleon's crew.

. . . . But (de Coloma goes on) we have heard much of sea demons and fire breathing monsters of the Western Seas. And it is in our secret mind that such tales often are the outgrowth of a fear-inflamed imagination, or given in excuse for a disaster that, coming through poor seamanship, destroyed many of His Majesty's galleons.

Too many such tales are brought back, and always, it seems, when galleons have been lost. Now, were some fleet of His Majesty's to sail for *Las Indias Occidentales*, remain there for a length of time, then return intact bringing such a tale, we might have cause to believe, the story not being fired through fear of consequences. But this continual notice given to fiery monsters becomes wearisome.

We would that some of these returned mariners, in accounting for their troubles, might bring back some new and unheard account, and not forever and ever lay the blame upon the Devil of the Western Seas.

May I, in concluding, repeat one small thought I put down in the beginning.

There have been strange incidents in the past. There have been strange events of today. It is my belief, sincere and frank, that between certain of those of the past and these of the present, there lies a definite and explainable relationship.

That is the point I hoped to drive home. And the story brought to de Coloma of old Spain by the crew of a lone surviving galleon, with that of Dr. Hardwick of the modern destroyer, so fit together in every detail that I have come to believe. And frankly, I hope that you see the things as clearly as do I. We know but little of the marvels of this world of ours. The past is behind us, the present is here, and the future ahead.

Who knows when the great god Time will relent, and let us tread all three?

Happy Relief From Painful Backache

Caused by Tired Kidneys

Many of those gnawing, nagging, painful backaches people blame on colds or strains are often caused by tired kidneys — and may be relieved when treated in the right way.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills. (ADV.)

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The Blind Spot

By AUSTIN HALL and HOMER EON FLINT

Part II

Can we pierce the nebulous screen which shuts us out from the occult?

What happened before:

Three people have disappeared suddenly in the house of the Blind Spot. The presence of a mysterious man, Rhamda Avec, and a strangely beautiful woman called the Nervina, seems to be connected with the phenomenon.

When Chick Watson went through the "gate" into the unknown, Harry Wendel and Hobart Fenton put up a desperate fight to save him from the Rhamda. They finally became exhausted and lost consciousness.

CHAPTER X

MAN OR FANTOM?

WHAT was it? How long I lay there I do not know. A dim light was burning. I was in a room. The ceiling overhead was worked in a grotesque pattern; I could not make it out. My clothes were in tatters and my hand was covered with blood. Something warm was trickling down my face. What was it? The air was still and sodden. Who was this man beside me? And what was this smell of roses?

I lay still for a minute, thinking. Ah, yes! It came back. Watson—Chick Watson! The Blind Spot! The Rhamda and the bell! Surely it was a dream. How could all this be in one short night? It was like a nightmare and impossible. What was this smell of roses? I raised up on my elbow and looked at the form beside me. It was Hobart Fenton. He was unconscious.

For a moment my mind was whirring; I was too weak and unsteady. I dropped back and wondered absently at the odor of roses. Roses meant perfume, and perfume meant a woman. What could—

Something touched my face—something soft; it plucked tenderly at my tangled hair and drew it away from my forehead. It was the hand of a woman!

"You poor, foolish boy! You foolish boy!"

Some place I had heard that voice; it had a touch of sadness; it was familiar; it was soft and silken like music that might have been woven out of the moonbeams. Who was it that always made me think of the moonbeams? I lay still, thinking.

"He dared; he dared; he dared!" she was saying. "As if there were not two! He shall pay for this! Am I to be a plaything? You poor boy!"

Then I remembered. I looked up. It was the Nervina. She was stooping over with my head against her. How beautiful her eyes were! In their depths was a pathos and a tenderness that was past a woman's, the same slight droop at the corners of the mouth, and the wistfulness; her features were relaxed like a mother's—a wondrous sweetness and pity.

"Harry," she asked, "where is Watson? Did he go?"

I nodded.

"Into the Blind Spot?"

"Yes. What is the Blind Spot?"

She ignored the question.

"I am sorry," she answered. "So sorry. I would have saved him. And the Rhamda; was he here, too?"

I nodded. Her eyes flashed wickedly.

"And—and you— Tell me, did you fight with the Rhamda? You—"

"It was Watson," I interrupted. "This Rhamda is back of it all. He is the villain. I would hold him. He can fight like a tiger; whoever he is, he can fight."

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"Give me the ring," she said. "It is worse than death for any man who wears it . . . I am your friend—"

But what was the Rhamda to her? Was it not for him that she wanted the ring?

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She frowned slightly; she shook her head. More than ever I noticed the sadness and wistfulness; her beauty was unlike any other; her eyes, so black, were for all that soft; in their depths lurked pity and tenderness—a great longing. I wondered vaguely what it was; who was she?

"You young men," she said. "You young men! You are all alike! Why must it be? I am so sorry. And you fought with the Rhamda? You could not overcome him, of course. But tell me, how could you resist him? What did you do?"

What did she mean? I had felt his flesh and muscle. He was a man. Why could he not be conquered—not be resisted?

"I do not understand," I answered. "He is a man. I fought him. He was here. Let him account for Watson. We fought alone at first, until he tried to throw me into this Thing. Then Hobart stepped in. Once I thought we had him, but he was too slippery. He came near putting us both in. I don't know. Something happened—a bell."

HER hand was on my arm; she clutched it tightly, she swallowed hard; in her eyes flashed the fire that I had noticed once before, the softness died out, and their glint was almost terrible.

"He! The bell saved you? He would dare to throw you into the Blind Spot!"

I lay back. I was terribly weak and uncertain. This beautiful woman! What was her interest in myself?

"Harry," she spoke, "let me ask you. I am your friend. If you only knew! I would save you. It must not be. Will you give me the ring? If I could only tell you! You must not have it. It is death—yes, worse than death. No man may wear it."

So that was it. Again and so soon I was to be tempted. Was her concern feigned or real? Why did she call me Harry? Why did I not resent it? She was wonderful; she was beautiful; she was pure. Was it merely a subtle play for the Rhamda? I could still hear Watson's voice ringing out of the Blind Spot; "Hold the ring! Hold the ring!" I could not be false to my friend.

"Tell me first," I asked. "Who is this Rhamda? What is he? Is he a man?"

"No."

Not a man! I remembered Watson's words: "A fantom!" How could it be? At least I would find out what I could.

"Then tell me, what is he?"

She smiled faintly; again the elusive tenderness lingered about her lips, the wistful droop at the corners.

"That I may not tell you, Harry. You could not understand. Would that I could."

Certainly I could not understand her evasion. I studied and watched her—her wondrous hair, the perfection of her throat, the curve of her bosom.

"Then he is supernatural."

"No, not that, Harry. That would explain everything. One can not go above Nature. He is living just as you are."

I studied a moment.

"Are you a woman?" I asked suddenly.

Perhaps I should not have asked it; she was so sad and beautiful, somehow I could not doubt her sincerity. There was a burden back of her sadness, some great yearning unsatisfied, unattainable. She dropped her head. The hand upon my arm quivered and clutched spasmodically; I caught the least sound of a sob. When I looked up her eyes were wet and sparkling.

"Oh," she said. "Harry, why do you ask it? You are the only man who has ever guessed. A woman! Harry, a woman! To live and love and to be loved. What must it be? There is so much of life that is sweet and pure. I love it—I love it! I can have everything but the most exalted thing of all. I can live, see, enjoy, think, but I can not have love. Your humblest maiden is a queen beside me. You knew it from the first. How did you know it? Would that I were woman. Your life is beautiful. How did you know? You said— Ah, it is true! I am out of the moonbeams." She controlled herself suddenly. "Excuse me," she said simply. "But you can never understand. May I have the ring?"

It was like a dream—her beauty, her voice, everything. But I could still hear Watson. I was to be tempted, cajoled, flat-

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tered. What was this story out of the moonbeams? Certainly she was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. Why had I asked such a question?

"I shall keep the ring," I answered.

She sighed. A strange weakness came over me; I was drowsy; I lapsed again into unconsciousness; just as I was fading away I heard her speaking: "I am so sorry!"

CHAPTER XI

BAFFLED

WAS IT a dream? The next I knew somebody was dousing water down my neck. It was Hobart Fenton. "Lord," he was saying, "I thought you were never coming to. What hit us? You are pretty well cut up. That was some fight. This Rhamda, who is he? Can you figure him out? Did you hear that bell? What was it?"

I sat up. Hobart was bathing my face. We were both in tatters. Hobart had washed my hands.

"Where is the Nervina?" I asked.

"The who?" He was bewildered. "Oh, I guess she's down at the café. Thought you had forgotten her. Wasn't her mate enough? It might be healthy to forget his Nervina."

He was a pretty sight; his clothes were ribbons; his plump figure was breaking out the seams. He regarded me critically.

"What do you think of the Blind Spot?" he asked. "Who is the Rhamda? He put us out pretty easily."

"But the girl?" I interrupted. "The girl? Confound it, the girl?"

It was some time before I could make him understand; even then he refused to believe me.

"It was all a dream," he said; "all a dream."

But I was certain.

Fenton began prodding about the room. I do not believe any apartment was ever so thoroughly ransacked. We even tore up the carpet. When we were through he sat in the midst of the débris and wiped his forehead.

"It's no use, Harry—no use. We might know better. It can't be done. Yet you say you saw a string of incandescence."

"A single string; the form of Watson; a blur—then nothing," I answered.

He thought. He quoted the professor: "'Out of the occult. I shall bring you proof and the substance. It will be concrete—within the reach of your senses.' Is that not what the doctor said?"

"Then you believe Professor Holcomb?"

"Why not? Did we not see it? I know a deal of material science; but nothing like this. I always had faith in Dr. Holcomb. After all, it is not impossible. First we must go over the house thoroughly."

We did. Most of all, we were interested in that bell. We did not think, either of us, that so much noise could come out of nothing. It was too material. The other we could credit to the occult; but not the sound. It had drowned our consciousness; perhaps it had saved us from the Rhamda. But we found nothing. We went over the house systematically. It was much as it had been previously described, only now a bit more furnished. The same dank, musty smell and the same suggestive silence. We returned to the lower floor and the library. It was a sorry sight. We straightened up the shelves and returned the books to their places.

It was getting along in the morning. Hobart sailed at nine o'clock. We must have new clothing and some coffee; likewise we must collect our wits. I had the ring, and had given my pledge to Watson. I was muddled. We must get down to sane action. First of all we must return to our rooms.

The fog had grown thicker; one could almost taste it. I could not suppress a shudder. It was cold, dank, repressive. Neither of us spoke a word on our way down-town. Hobart opened the door to our apartment; he turned on the lights. We had always kept a small outfit with which to warm up a light lunch. We both of us did a deal of night work and often made

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hot coffee as the morning approached.

In a few moments we had our hot, steaming cups. Still we did not speak. Hobart sat in his chair, his elbows on the table and his head between his hands. My thoughts ran back to that day in college when he had said: "I was just thinking, Harry, if I had one hundred thousand dollars, I would solve the Blind Spot."

That was long ago. We had neither of us thought that we would come to the fact.

"Well," I spoke, "have you got that hundred thousand dollars? You had an idea once."

He looked up.

"I've got it yet. I am not certain. It is merely a theory. But it's not impossible."

He had a pretty solid head on his fat body. He had no use for sophistry; he was too material, too wedded to bolts and pistons. I was interested.

"Well, what is it?"

HE TOOK another drink of coffee and settled back in his chair.

"It is energy, Harry—force. Nothing but energy—and Nature."

"Then it is not occult?" I asked.

"Certainly it is. I did not say that. It is what the professor promised. Something concrete for our senses. If the occult is, it can certainly be proven. The professor was right. It is energy, force, vibration. It has a law. The old doctor was caught somehow. We must watch our step and see that we are not swallowed up also. Perhaps we shall go the way of Watson."

I shuddered.

"I hope not. But explain. You speak in volumes. Come back to earth."

"That's easy, Harry. I can give you my theory in a few short words. You have studied physiology, haven't you? Well, that's where you can get your proof—or rather let me say my theory. What is the Blind Spot?"

"In optics?"

"We'll forego that," he answered. "I refer to this one."

I thought a moment.

"Well," I said, "I don't know. It was something I could not see. Watson went out before our eyes. He was lost."

"Exactly. Do you get the point?"

"No."

"It is this. What you see is merely energy. Your eye is merely a machine. It catches certain colors. Which in turn are merely ratios of vibration. There is nothing to matter but force, Harry; if we could get down deep enough and knew a few laws, we could transmute it."

"What has it to do with the occult?"

"Merely a fact. The eye machine catches only certain ratios of energy. There are undoubtedly any number of ratios; the eye cannot see them."

"Then this would account for the Blind Spot?"

"Exactly. A localized spot, a condition, a combination of phenomena, anything entering it becomes invisible."

"Where does it go to?"

"That's it. Where? It's one of the things that man has been guessing at for the ages. The professor is the first philosopher with sound sense. He went after it. 'Tis a pity he was trapped."

"By the Rhamda?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Who is he?"

Hobart smiled.

"How do I know? Where did he come from? If we knew that, we would know everything. 'A fantom,' so Watson says. If so, it only strengthens our theory. It would make man and matter only a part of creation. Certainly it would clear up a lot of doubts."

"And the ring?"

"It controls the Blind Spot."

"In what way?"

"That's for us to find out."

"And Watson? He is in this land of doubt?"

"At least he is in the Blind Spot. Let us try the ring."

He struck a match.

It was much as it had been in the restaurant, only a bit more startling; the blue faded, the color went out, and it became

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transparent. For a moment. There was an effect of space and distance that I had not noted before, almost marvelous. If I would describe it at all, I would say a crystal corridor of a vastness that can scarcely be imagined. It made one dizzy, even in that bit of jewel: one lost proportion, it was height, distance, space immeasurable. For an instant. Then the whole thing blurred and clouded. Something passed across the face; the transparency turned to opaqueness, and then—two men. It was as sudden as a flash—the materialization. There was no question. They were alive. Watson was with the professor.

It was a strange moment. Only an hour before one of them had been with us. It was Watson, beyond a doubt. He was alive; one could almost believe him in the jewel. We had heard his story: "The screen of the occult; the curtain of shadow." We had seen him go. There was an element of horror in the thing, and of fascination. The great professor! The faithful Watson! Where had they gone?

It was not until the color had come back and the blue had regained its luster that either of us looked up. Could such a thing be unraveled? Fenton turned the stone over thoughtfully. He shook his head.

"In that jewel, Harry, lies the secret. I wish I knew a bit more about physics, light, force, energy, vibration. We have got to know."

"Your theory?"

"It still holds good."

I thought.

"Let me get it clear, Hobart. You say that we catch only certain vibrations."

"That's it. Our eyes are instruments, nothing else. We can see light, but we cannot hear it. We hear sound, but we cannot see it. Of course they are not exactly parallel. But it serves the point. Let us go a bit further. The eye picks up certain ratios. Light is nothing but energy vibrating at a tremendous speed. It has to be just so high for the eye to pick it up. A great deal we do not get. For instance, we can only catch one-twelfth of the solar spectrum. We have been too much from Missouri. We believed only what we could see. Science has pulled us out of the rut. It may pull us through the Blind Spot."

"And beyond."

Hobart held up his hands.

"It is almost too much to believe. We have made a discovery. We must watch our step. We must not lose. The work of Dr. Holcomb shall not go for nothing."

"And the ring?"

He consulted his watch.

"We have only a short time left. We must map our action. We have three things to work on—the ring, the house, Bertha Holcomb. It's all up to you, Harry. Find out all that is possible; but go slow. I shall be in the offing. Trace down that ring; find out everything that you can. Go see Bertha Holcomb. Perhaps she can give you some data. Watson said no; but perhaps you may uncover it. Take the ring to a lapidary; but do not let him cut it. Last of all, and most important, buy the house of the Blind Spot. Draw on me. Let me pay half, anyway."

"I shall move into it," I answered.

He hesitated a bit.

"I am afraid of that," he answered. "Well, if you wish. Only be careful. Remember I shall return just as soon as I can get loose. If you feel yourself slipping or anything happens, cable."

The hours passed all too quickly. When day came we had our breakfast and hurried down to the pier. It was hard to have him go. His last words were like Hobart Fenton. He repeated the warning.

"Watch your step, Harry; watch your step. Take things easy; be cautious. Get the house. Trace down the ring. Be sure of yourself. Keep me informed. If you need me, cable. I'll come if I have to swim."

His last words; and not a year ago. It seems now like a lifetime. As I stood upon the pier and watched the ship slipping into the water, I felt it coming upon me. It had grown steadily, a gloom and oppression not to be thwarted; it is silent and subtle and past defining—like shadow. The

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gray, heavy heave of the water; the great hull of the steamer backing into the bay; the gloom of the fog bank. A few uncertain lines, the shrill of the siren, the mist settling; I was alone. It was isolation.

I had been warned by Watson. But I had not guessed. At the moment I sensed it. It was the beginning. Out of my heart I could feel it—solitude.

In the great and populous city I was to be alone, in all its teeming life I was to be a stranger. It has been a year—a year! It has been a lifetime. A breaking down of life!

I have waited and fought and sought to conquer. One cannot fight against shadow. It is merciless and inexorable. There are secrets that may be locked forever. It was my duty, my pledge to Watson, what I owed to the Professor. I have hung on grimly; what the end will be I do not know. I have cabled for Fenton.

CHAPTER XII

A DEAL IN REALTY

BUT to return. There was work that I should do—much work, if I was going after the solution. In the first place, there was the house. I turned my back to the waterfront and entered the city. The streets were packed, the commerce of man jostled and threaded along the highways; there was life and action, hope, ambition. It was what I had loved so well. Yet now it was different.

I realized it vaguely, and wondered. This feeling of aloofness? It was intrinsic, coming from within, like the withering of one's marrow. I laughed at my foreboding; it was not natural; I tried to shake myself together.

I had no difficulty with the records. In less than an hour I traced out the owners, "an estate," and had located the agent. It just so happened that he was a man with whom I had some acquaintance. We were not long in coming to business.

"The house at No. 288 Chatterton?"

I noticed that he was startled; there was a bit of wonder in his look—a quizzical alertness. He motioned me to a chair and closed the door.

"Sit down, Mr. Wendel; sit down. H-m! The house at No. 288 Chatterton? Did I hear you right?"

Again I noted the wonder; his manner was cautious and curious. I nodded.

"Want to buy it or just lease it? Pardon me, but you are sort of a friend. I would not like to lose your friendship for the sake of a mere sale. What is your—"

"Just for a residence," I assisted. "A place to live in."

"I see. Know anything about this place?"

"Do you?"

He fumbled with some papers. For an agent he did not strike me as being very solicitous for a commission.

"Well," he said, "in a way, yes. A whole lot more than I'd like to. It all depends. One gets much from hearsay. What I know is mostly rumor." He began marking with a pencil. "Of course I don't believe it. Neverthless I would hardly recommend it to a friend as a residence."

"And these rumors?"

He looked up; for a moment he studied; then:

"Ever hear of the Blind Spot? Perhaps you remember Dr. Holcomb—in 1905, before the quake. It was a murder. The papers were full of it at the time; since then it has been occasionally featured in the supplements. I do not believe in the story; but I can trust to facts. The last seen of Dr. Holcomb was in this house. It is called the Blind Spot."

"Then you believe in the story?" I asked.

He looked at me.

"Oh, you know it, eh? No, I do not. It's all buncomb; reporters' work and exaggeration. If you like that kind of stuff, it is weird and interesting. But it hurts property. The man was undoubtedly murdered. The tale hangs over the house. It is impossible to dispose of the place."

"Then why not sell it to me?"

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He dropped his pencil; he was a bit nervous.

"A fair question, Mr. Wendel—a very fair question. Well, now, why don't I? Perhaps I shall. There's no telling. But I'd rather not. Do you know, a year ago I would have jumped at an offer. Fact is, I did lease it—the lease ran out yesterday—to a man named Watson. I don't believe a thing in this nonsense; but what I have seen during the past year has tested my nerve considerably."

"What about Watson?"

"Watson? A year ago he came to see me in regard to this Chatterton property. Wanted to lease it. Was interested in the case of Dr. Holcomb; asked for a year's rental and the privilege of renewal. I don't know. I gave it to him; but when he drops in again I am going to fight almighty hard against letting him hold it longer."

"Why?"

"Why? Why, because I don't believe in murder. A year ago he came to me the healthiest and happiest man I ever saw; today he is a shadow. I watched that boy go down. Understand, I don't believe a damn word I'm saying; but I have seen it. It's that cursed house. I say no, when I reason; but it keeps on my nerves; it's on my conscience. It is insidious. Every month when he came here I could see disintegration. One year ago he was an athlete; today he is a shadow. There is nothing left of the boy but a soul. It is pitiful to see a young man stripped of life like that; forlorn, hopeless, gone. He has never told me what it is; but I have wondered. A battle; some conflict with—there I go again. It's on my nerves, I tell you, on my nerves. If this keeps up I'll burn it."

IT WAS a bit foreboding. Already I could feel the tugging at my heart that had done for Watson. This man had watched my friend slipping into the shadow; I had come to take his place.

"Watson has gone," I said simply; "that's why I am here."

He straightened up.

"You know him then. He was not—"

"He went last night; he has left the country. He was in very poor health. That's why I am here. I know very well the cloud that hangs over the property; it is my sole reason for purchasing."

"You don't believe in this nonsense?"

I smiled. Certainly the man was preverse in his agnosticism; he was stubborn in disbelief. It was on his nerves; on his conscience; he was afraid.

"I believe nothing," I answered; "neither do I disbelieve. I know all the story that has been told or written. I am a friend of Watson. You need not scruple in making me out a bill of sale. It's my own funeral. I abide by the consequences."

He gave a sigh of relief. After all, he was human. He had honor; but it was after the brand of Pontius Pilate. He wished nothing on his conscience.

Armed with the keys and the legal title, I took possession. In the daylight it was much as it had been the night before. Once across its threshold, one was in dank and furtive suppression; the air was heavy; a mold of age had streaked the walls and gloomed the shadows. I put up all the curtains to let in the rush of sunlight, likewise I opened the windows. If there is anything to beat down sin, it is the open measure of broad daylight.

The house was well situated; from the front windows one could look down the street and out at the blue bay beyond the city. The fog had lifted and the sun was shining upon the water. I could make out the ferryboats, the islands, and the long piers that lead to Oakland, and still farther beyond the hills of Berkeley. It was a long time since those days in college. Under the shadow of those hills I had first met the old doctor. I was only a boy then.

I could not but think of that day in Ethics 2b. I had doubted then, and had been a bit of a skeptic. With the clutch at my heart-strings I could now sense the truth that had weighted the wisdom of Dr. Holcomb. It was foreboding; there is not a thing on earth as terrible as loneliness and isolation. I turned into the build-

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ing. Even the sound of my footsteps was foreign; the whole place was pregnant with stillness and shadow; life was gone out. It was fearful; I felt the terror clutching upon me, a grimness that may not be spoken; there was something breaking within me. I had pledged myself for a year. Frankly I was afraid.

But I had given my word. I returned to my apartments and began that very day the closing out of my practice. In a fortnight I had completed everything and had moved my things to the room of Chick Watson.

CHAPTER XIII

ALBERT JEROME

JUST as soon as possible I hurried over to Berkeley. I went straight to the bungalow on Dwight Way; I inquired for Miss Holcomb. She was a young woman, now in her twenties, decidedly pretty, a blonde, and of the intelligent bearing that one would expect in the daughter of the professor.

Coming on such an errand, I was at a loss just how to approach her. I noted the little lines about the corners of her eyes, the sad droop of her pretty mouth. Plainly she was worried. As I was removing my hat she caught sight of the ring upon my finger.

"Oh," she said; "then you come from Mr. Watson. How is Chick?"

"Mr. Watson"—I did not like lying, but I could not but feel for her; she had already lost her father—"Mr. Watson has gone on a trip up-country—with Jerome. He was not feeling well. He has left this ring with me. I have come for a bit of information."

She bit her lips; her mouth quivered.

"Could you not get this from Mr. Watson? He knows about the stone. Did he not tell you? How came it into your possesion? What has happened?"

Her voice was querulous and suspicious. I had endeavored to deceive her for her own sake; she had suffered enough already. I could not but wince at the pain in her beautiful blue eyes. She stood up.

"Please, Mr. Wendel; do not be clumsy. Do not regard me as a mere baby. Tell me what has happened to Chick. Please—"

She stopped in a flow of emotion. Tears came to her eyes; but she held control. She sat down.

"Tell me all, Mr. Wendell. It is what I expected." She blinked to hold back her tears. "It is my fault. You would not have the ring had nothing happened. Tell me. I shall be brave."

And brave she was—splendid. With the tug at my own heart I could understand her. What an uncertainty and dread she must have been under! I had been in it but a few days; already I could feel the weight. At no time could I surmount the isolation; there was something going from me minute by minute. With the girl there could be no evasion; it were better that she have the truth. I made a clean breast of the whole affair.

"And he told you no more about the ring?"

"That is all," I answered. "He would have told us much more, undoubtedly, had he not—"

She gulped back her sorrow; she was under a brave control.

"You saw him go—you saw this thing?"

"That is just it, Miss Holcomb. We saw nothing. One minute we were looking at Chick, and the next at nothing. Hobart understood it better than I. At least he forbade my crossing the room. There is a danger point, a spot that may not be crossed. He threw me back. It was then that the Rhamda came upon the scene."

She frowned slightly.

"This Rhamda. He is the great man papa was to have for luncheon. I am afraid; sometimes I fear that papa was the victim of plain villainy. But I would not say so. Most of the time I think that he made a great discovery; this Rhamda, he holds the secret; perhaps for our own good. Somehow I am afraid of the occult. Do you blame the Rhamda?"

"To a certain extent," I answered. "He

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is certainly a prime factor; whether his presence that night had aught to do with the miracle or was just accidental, I cannot say. But I do know that both he and the Nervina are concerned over this ring.

She arched her eyebrows.

"Tell me about the Nervina. When Chick spoke of her, I could always feel jealous. Is she beautiful?"

"Most beautiful, the most wonderful girl I have ever seen, though I would hardly class her as one to be jealous of. She is above that. She is vital and super-beauty; but she is not evil. If I would take her at her word, she is the maiden of the moonbeams; but I am not sure that I was not dreaming. Above all she wants the ring. I have promised Watson, and of course I shall keep it. But I would like its history."

"I think I can give you some information there," she answered. "The ring, or rather the jewel, was given to papa about twenty years ago by a Mr. Kennedy. He had been a scholar of papa's back in Chillicothe, Ohio, when papa taught district school. He came here often in those days to talk over old times. Papa had the jewel set in a ring; but he never wore it."

"Why?"

"I do not know."

"How did Watson come to link it up with the Blind Spot?"

"That, I think, was an accident. He was in college, you know, at the time of father's disappearance. In fact, he was in Ethics 2b. I was attending high school. Our love was just in its inception. He came here often, and during one of his visits I showed him the ring. That was several years ago."

"I see."

"Well, about a year ago he was here again, and asked to see the jewel. We were to be married, you understand; but I had always put it off because of father. Somehow I felt that he would return. It was in the late summer, about September; it was in the evening; it was getting dark. I gave Chick the ring, and stepped into the garden to cut some flowers. I know it was in the evening because I had such difficulty in selecting the blossoms. I remember that Chick struck a match in the parlor. When I came back he seemed to be excited."

"Did he ask you for the ring?"

"Yes. He wanted to wear it. And he suddenly began to talk of papa. It was that night that he took it upon himself to find him."

"I see. Not before that night? Did he take the ring then?"

"Yes. We went to the opera. I remember it well, because that night was the first time I ever knew Chick to be gloomy."

"Ah!"

"Yes. You know how jolly he always was. When we returned that night he would scarcely say a word. I thought he was sick; but he said he was not; said he just felt that way."

"I understand. And he kept getting glummer? Did you suspect the jewel? Did he ever tell you anything?"

She shook her head.

"No. He told me nothing, except that he would find papa. Of course, I became excited and wanted to know. But he insisted that I could not help; that he had a clue, and that it might take time. From that night I saw very little of him. He leased the house on Chatterton Place. He seemed to lose interest in myself; when he did come over he would act queerly. He talked incoherently, and would often make rambling mention of a beautiful girl called Nervina. You say it is the ring? Tell me, Mr. Wendel, what is it? Has it really anything to do with papa?"

I nodded.

"I think it has, Miss Holcomb. And I can understand poor Chick. He is a very brave man. It is a strange jewel and of terrible potence; that much I know. It devitalizes; it destroys. I can feel it already. It covers life with the fog of decay. The same solitude has come upon myself. Nevertheless I am certain it has much to do with the Blind Spot. It is a key of some sort. The very interest of the Rhamda and the Nervina tell us that. I think

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it was through this stone that your father made his discovery."

She thought a moment.

"Had you not better return it? It is really terrible, Mr. Wendel. You are a strong man. While you still have health? If you keep it, it will be only one more."

"You forget, Miss Holcomb, my promise to Chick. I loved your father, and I loved Watson. It is a great secret, and, if the professor is right, one which man has sought through ages. I would be a coward to forego my duty. If I fail I have another to take my place."

"Oh," she said, "it is horrible. First papa: then Chick; now it is you; and afterward it will be Mr. Fenton."

"It is our duty," I returned. "One by one. Though we fail, each one of us may pass a bit more on his successor. In the end we win. It is the way of man."

I HAD my way. She turned over all the data and notes that had been left by the professor; but I had never found a thing in them that could be construed to an advantage. My real quest was to trace down the jewel. The man Kennedy's full name was, I learned, Wudge Kennedy. He had lived in Oakland. It was late in the afternoon when I parted with Miss Holcomb and started for the city.

I remember it well because of a little incident that occurred immediately after our parting. I was just going down the steps when I looked up one of the side streets. It was flanked by fraternity houses. A few students were loitering here and there. But there was one who was not a student. I recognized him instantly, and I wondered. It was the Rhamda. This was enough to make me suspicious. But there was one thing more. Farther up the street was another figure.

When I came down the steps the Rhamda moved, and his move was somehow duplicated by the other. In itself this was enough to clear up some of my doubts concerning the fantom. His actions were too simple for an apparition. Only a man could act like that, and a crude one. I did not know then the nerve of the Rhamda. There was no doubt that I was being shadowed.

To make certain, I took the by-streets and meandered by a devious route to the station. There was no question; one and two they followed. I knew the Rhamda; but who was the other?

At the station we purchased tickets, and when the train pulled in I boarded the smoker. The other two took another coach—the stranger was a thick-set individual with a stubby, gray mustache. On the boat I did not see them; but at the ferry building I made a test to see that I was followed. I hailed a taxi and gave specific instructions to the driver.

"Drive slowly," I told him. "I think we shall be followed."

And I was right; in a few minutes there were two cars dogging our wheel-tracks. I had no doubt concerning the Rhamda; but I could not understand the other. At No. 288 Chatterton we stopped, and I alighted. The Rhamda's car passed, then the other. Neither stopped. Both disappeared about the corner. I took the numbers; then I went into the house. In about a half hour a car drew up at the curb. I stepped to the window. It was the car that had tracked the Rhamda's. The stubby individual stepped out; without ceremony he ran up the steps and opened the door. It was a bit disconcerting, I think, for both. He was plain and blunt—and honest.

"Well," he said, "where's Watson? Who are you? What do you want?"

"That," I answered, "is a question for both of us. Who are you, and what do you want? Where is Watson?"

Just then his eyes dropped and his glance fell on the ring. His jaw fell and his eyes widened.

"My name is Jerome," he said simply. "Has something happened to Watson? Who are you?"

We were standing in the library; I made an indication toward the other room. "In there," I said. "My name is Wendel."

He took off his hat and ran the back of his hand across his forehead.

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"So that pair got him, too! I was afraid of them all the while. And I had to be away. Do you know how they did it? What's the working of their game? It's almighty devilish and certainly clever. They played that boy for a year; they knew they would get him in the end. So did I.

"He was a fine lad, a fine lad. I knew this morning when I came down from Nevada that they had him. Found your duds. A stranger. House looked queer. But I had hopes that he may have gone over to see his girl. Just thought I'd wander over to Berkeley. Found that bird Rhamda under a palm tree watching the Holcomb bungalow. It was the first time I'd seen him since that day that things went amiss with the professor. In about ten minutes you came out. I stayed with him while he tracked you back here; I followed him back down-town and lost him. Tell me about Watson."

HE SAT down; during my recital he spoke not a word. He consumed one cigar after another; when I stopped for a moment he merely nodded his head and waited until I continued. He was sturdy and frank, of an iron way and vast common sense. I liked him. When I had finished he remained silent; his grief was of a solid kind; he had liked poor Watson.

"I see," he said. "It is as I thought. He told you more than he ever told me."

"He never told you?"

"Not much. He was a strange lad—about the loneliest one I have ever seen. There was something about him from the very first that was not natural; I could not make him out. You say it is the ring. He always wore it. I laid it to this Rhamda. He was always meeting him. I could never understand it. Try as I would, I could not get a trace of the fantom."

"The fantom?"

"Most assuredly. Would you call him human?" His gray eyes were flecked with light. "Come now, Mr. Wendel, would you?"

"Well," I answered, "I don't know. Not after what I have seen. But for all that, I have proof of his sinews. I am inclined to blend the two. There is a law somewhere, a very natural one. The Blind Spot is undoubtedly a combination of phenomena; it has a control. We do not know what it is, or where it leads to; neither do we know the motive of the Rhamda. Who is he? If we knew that, we would know everything."

"And this ring?"

"I shall wear it."

"Then God help you. I watched Watson. It's plain poison. You have a year; but you had better count on six months. We must look up this Wudge Kennedy. He gave the jewel to the professor. But the doctor did not wear it. Not so you could notice. You had better count on half a year; the first six months are not so bad; but the last—it takes a man! Wendel, it takes a man! Already you are eating your heart out. Oh, I know—you have opened the windows; you want sunshine and air. In six months I shall have to fight to get one open. It gets into the soul; it is stagnation; you die by inches. Better give me the ring."

"This Wudge Kennedy," I evaded, "we must find him. We have time. One clue may lead us on. Tell me what you know of the Blind Spot."

"Very easy," he answered; "you have it all. I have been here a number of years. You will remember I fell into the case through intuition. I have never had any definite proof, outside the professor's disappearance, the old lady, and that bell; unless perhaps it is the Rhamda. But from the beginning I have been positive.

"Taking that lecture in ethics as a starter, I built up my theory. There is a Blind Spot. We have that from the professor. All the clues lead to this building. It is something that I cannot understand. It is out of the occult. It is a bit too much for me. I moved into the place and waited. I have never forgotten that bell, nor the old lady. You and Fenton are the only ones who have seen the Blind Spot."

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I had a sudden thought.

"The Rhamda! I have read that he has the manner of inherent goodness. Is it true? You have conversed with him. I have not had the pleasure."

"He has. He did not strike me as a villain. He is intrinsic; noble, out of self. I have often wondered."

I smiled. "Perhaps we are thinking the same thing. Is this it? The Blind Spot is a secret that man may not attain to. It is unknowable and akin to death. The Rhamda knows it. He could not head off the professor. It is something that must be held from mankind. He has simply employed Dr. Holcomb's wisdom to trap him; now that he has him secure, he intends to hold him. It is for our own good."

"Exactly. Yet—"

"Yet?"

"He was very anxious to put you and Fenton into this very Spot."

"That is so. But may it not be that we, too, knew a bit too much?"

He could not answer that.

Nevertheless, we were both of us convinced concerning the Rhamda. It was merely a digression of thought, a conjecture. He might be good; but we were both positive of his villainy. It was his motive, of course, that weighed up his character; could we find that, we would uncover everything.

CHAPTER XIV

A NEW ELEMENT

WUDGE Kennedy was not so easily found. There were many Kennedys. About two-thirds of Ireland had apparently migrated to San Francisco under that name and had lodged in the directory. Of course Wudge was an uncommon name. We went through the lists on both sides of the bay, but found nothing; the old directories had mostly been destroyed by fire or had been thrown away as worthless; but at last we unearthed one. In it we found the name of Wudge Kennedy. He had two sons—Patrick and Henry. One of these, Hank, we ran down in the Mission. He was a great, red-headed, broad-shouldered Irishman. He was just eating supper when we called; there were splotches of white plaster on his trousers and white rims about the edge of his nails.

I came right to the point: "Do you know anything about this?" I held out the ring.

He took it in his fingers; his eyes popped. "What, that! Well, I guess I do! Where'd you get it?" He called out to the kitchen: "Say Mollie, come here. Here's the old man's jool!" He looked at me a bit fearfully. "You are not wearing it?"

"Why not?" I asked.

"Why? Well, I don't know exactly. I wouldn't wear it for a million dollars. It ain't a jool; it's a piece of the divil. The old man gave it to Dr. Holcomb—or sold it, I don't know which. He carried it in his pocket once, and he came near dying."

"Unlucky?" I asked.

"No, it ain't unlucky; it just rips your heart out. It would make you hate your grandmother. Lonesome! Lonesome! I've often heard the old man talking."

"He sold it to Dr. Holcomb? Do you know why?"

"Well, yes. 'Twas that the old doc had some scientific work. Dad told him about his jool. One day he took it over to Berkeley. It was some kind of thing that the professor just wanted. He kept it. Dad made him promise not to wear it."

"I see. Did your father ever tell you where he got it?"

"Oh, yes. He often spoke about that. The old man wasn't a plasterer, you know—just a laborer. He was digging a basement. I was only a kid then. It was funny basement—a sort of blind cellar. There was a stone wall right across the middle, and then there was a door of wood to look like stone. You can go down into the back cellar, but not into the front. If you don't know about the door, you will never find it. Dad often spoke about that. He was working in the back cellar when he found this. 'Twas sticking in some blue clay."

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"Where was this place? Do you remember?"

"Sure. 'Twas up on Chatterton Place. Pat and I was kids then; we took the old man's dinner."

"Do you know the number?"

"It didn't have no number; but I know the place. 'Tis a two-story house, and was built in 'ninety-one."

I nodded. "And afterward you moved to Oakland?"

"Yes."

"Did your father ever speak of the reason for this partition?"

"He never knew of one. It was none of his business. He was merely a laborer, and did what he was paid for."

"Do you know who built it?"

"Some old guy. He was a cranky cuss with side-burns. He used to wear a stovepipe hat. I think he was a chemist. Whenever he showed up he would run us kids out of the building. I think he was a bachelor."

This was all the information he could give, but it was a great deal. Certainly it was more than I had hoped for. The house had been built by a chemist; even in the construction there was mystery. I had never thought of a second cellar; when I had explored the building I had taken the stone wall for granted. It was so with Jerome. It was the first definite clue that really brought us down to earth. What had this chemist to do with the phenomena? After all, back of everything was lurking the mind of man.

We hastened back to the house and into the cellar. By merely sounding along the wall we discovered the door; it was cleverly constructed and for a time defied our efforts; but Jerome cut it open by means of a jimmy and a pick. The outside was a clever piece of sham work shaped like stone and smeared over with cement. In the dim light we had missed it. We had high expectations.

But we were disappointed. The apartment contained nothing; it was smeared with cobwebs and hairy mold; but outside of a few empty bottles and the gloomy darkness there was nothing. We tapped the walls and floor and ceiling. Beyond all the doubt the place once held a secret; if it held it still, it was cleverly hidden. After an hour or two of search we returned to the upper part of the building.

JEROME was not discouraged.

"We are on the right track, Mr. Wendell; if we can only get started. I have an idea. This chemist—it was in 'ninety-one—that's more than twenty years."

"What is your idea?"

"The Rhamda. What is the first thing that strikes you? His age. With every one that sees him it is the same. First a certainty of years, then a flitting notion of youth. He is elusive. At first you take him for an old man; if you study him long enough, you are positive that he is in his twenties. May he not be this chemist?"

"What becomes of the doctor and his Blind Spot?"

"The Blind Spot," answered Jerome, "is merely a part of the chemistry."

I whistled. The thing was getting devilish.

Next day I hunted up a jeweler. I was careful to choose one with whom I was acquainted. I asked for a private consultation. When we were alone I took the ring from my finger.

"Just an opinion," I asked. "You know gems. Can you tell me anything about this one?"

He picked it up casually, and turned it over; his mouth puckered. For a minute he studied.

"That? Well, now." He held it up. "Humph. Wait a minute."

"Is it a gem?"

"I think it is. At first I thought I knew it right off; but now—wait a minute."

He reached in the drawer for his glass. He held the stone up for some minutes. His face was a study; queer little wrinkles twisting from the corners of his eyes told his wonder. He did not speak; merely turned the stone round and round. At last

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he removed his glass and held up the ring. He was quizzical.

"Where did you get this?" he asked.

"That is something I do not care to answer. I wish to know what it is. Is it a gem? If so, what kind?"

He thought a moment and shook his head.

"I had thought I knew every gem on earth. But I don't know. This is a new one. It is beautiful—just a moment." He stepped to the door. In a moment another man stepped in. The jeweler motioned toward the ring. The man picked it up and again the examination. At last he laid the glass and the ring both upon the table.

"What do you make of it, Henry?" asked the jeweler.

"Not me," answered the second one. "Never saw one like it."

It was Watson had said. No man had ever identified the jewel. The two men were puzzled; they were interested. The jeweler turned to me.

"Would you care to leave it with us for a bit; you have no objection to us taking it out of the ring?"

I had not thought of that. I had business down the street. I consulted my watch.

"In half an hour I shall be back. Will that time be sufficient?"

"I think so."

It was an hour before I returned. The assistant was standing at the door of the office. He spoke something to the one inside and then made an indication to myself. He seemed excited; when I came closer I noted that his face was full of wonder.

"We have been waiting," said he, "for almost an hour; we did not examine the stone; it was not necessary. It is truly wonderful." He was a short, squat man with a massive forehead. "Just step inside."

Inside the office the jeweler was sitting beside a table; he was leaning back in his chair; he had his hands clasped over his stomach. He was gazing toward the ceiling; his face was a bit of a study, full of wonder and speculation. He nodded.

"Well?" I asked.

For answer he merely elevated his finger; he pointed toward the ceiling.

"Up there," he spoke. "Your jewel or whatever it is. 'Tis a good thing we were not in the open air. 'Twould be going yet."

I looked up. Sure enough. Against the ceiling was the gem. It was a bit disconcerting; though I will confess that in the first moment I did not catch the full significance.

The jeweler closed one eye and studied first myself and then the beautiful thing against the ceiling.

"What do you make of it?" he asked.

Really, I had not made anything; it was a bit of a shock; I had not grasped the full impossibility. I did not answer.

"Don't you see, Mr. Wendel? Impossible! Contrary to nature! Lighter than air. We took it out of the ring and it popped out like a bullet. Thought I'd dropped it. Began looking on the floor. Could not find it; looked up and saw Reynolds, here, with his eyes popping out like marbles. He was looking at the ceiling."

"'There's your jewel up there,' he says, 'on the ceiling.'"

I thought a moment.

"Then it is not a gem?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Not if I am a jeweler. Who ever heard of a stone without weight? It has no gravity, that is, apparently. I doubt whether it is a substance. I don't know what it is."

It was puzzling. I would have given a good deal just then for a few words with Dr. Holcomb. The man, Kennedy, had kept it in his pocket. How had he held it prisoner? The professor had had use for it in some scientific work! No wonder! Certainly it was not a jewel. What could it be? It was solid. It was lighter than air. Could it be a substance? If not, what was it?

"What would you advise?"

In answer the jeweler reached for the telephone. He gave a number.

"Hello. Say, is Ed there? This is Phil. Tell him to step to the phone. Hello! Say, Ed, I want you to come over on the jump.

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Something to show you. Too busy? No, you're not. Not for this. I'm going to teach you some chemistry. No; this is serious. What is it? I don't know. What's lighter than air? Lots of things? Oh, I know. But what solid? That's why I'm asking. Come over. All right. At once."

He hung up the receiver.

"My brother," he spoke. "It has passed beyond my province and into his. He is a chemist. As an expert he may give you a real opinion."

Surely we needed one. It was against reason. It had taken me completely off my feet. I took a chair and joined the others in the contemplation of that blue dot upon the ceiling. We could speculate and conjecture; but there was not one of us deep enough to even start a theory. Plainly it was what should not be. We had been taught physics and science; we had been drilled to fundamentals. This went back of our beginnings. If this thing could be, then the foundations upon which we stood were shattered. But one little law! Back in my mind was buzzing the enigma of the Blind Spot. They were woven together. Some law that had eluded the ken of mankind.

THE chemist was a tall man with a hook nose and black eyes that clinched like rivets. He was a bit impatient. He looked at his brother.

"Well, Phil, what is it?" He pulled out a watch. "I haven't much time."

There was a contrast between them. The jeweler was fat and complacent. He merely sat in his chair, his hand on his waistband and a stubby finger elevated toward the jewel. He seemed to enjoy it.

"You're a chemist, Ed. Here's a test for your wisdom. Can you explain that? No, over here. Above your head. That jewel?"

The other looked up.

"What's the idea? New notion for decoration? Or"—a bit testily—"is this a joke?" He was a serious man; his black eyes and the nose spoke his character—work and no play.

The jeweler laughed gently.

"Listen, Ed—" Then he went into explanation; when he was through the chemist was twitching with excitement.

"Get me a ladder. Here, let me get upon the table; perhaps I can reach it. Sounds impossible, but if it's so, it's so; it must have an explanation."

Without ado and in spite of the protests of his brother he stepped upon the polished surface of the table. He was tall man; he could just barely reach it with the tip of his finger. He could move it; but each time it clung as to a magnet. After a minute of effort he gave it up. When he looked down he was a different man; his black eyes glowed with wonder.

"Can't make it," he said. "Get a step-ladder. Strange!"

With the ladder it was easy. He plucked it off the ceiling. We pressed about the table. The chemist turned it about with his fingers.

"I wonder," he was saying. "It's a gem. Apparently. You say it has no gravity. It can't be. Whoop!" He had let it slip out of his fingers. Again it popped on its way to the ceiling. He caught it with a deft movement of his hand. "The devil! Did you ever see! And a solid! Who owns this?"

That brought it back to me. I explained what I could of the manner of my possession.

"I see. It is very interesting. Something I have never seen—and—frankly—something strictly against what I've been taught. Nevertheless, it is not impossible. We are witnesses at least. There are many things that we do not know. Would you care if I take this over to the laboratory?"

It was a new complication. If it were not a jewel there was a chance of its being damaged. I was as anxious as he; but I had been warned as to its possession.

"I shall not harm it. I shall see to that. I have suspicions and I'd like to verify them. A chemist does not blunder across such a thing every day. I am a chemist." His eyes glistened.

"Your suspicions?" I asked.

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"A new element."

This gem. A new element. Perhaps that would explain the Blind Spot. It was not exactly of earth. Everything had confirmed it.

"You— A new element? How do you account for it? It defies your laws. Most of your elements are evolved through tedious process. This is picked up by chance."

"That is so. But there are still a thousand ways. A meteor, perhaps; a bit of cosmic dust—there are many shattered comets. Our chemistry is earthly. There are undoubtedly new elements that we do not know of. Perhaps in enormous proportion."

I let him have it. It was the only night I had been away from the ring. I may say that it is the only time I have ever been free from its isolation.

WHEN I called at his office next day I found that he had merely confirmed his suspicions. It defied analysis; there was no reaction. Under all tests it was a stranger. The whole science that had been built up to explain everything had here explained nothing. However there was one thing that he had uncovered—heat. Perhaps I should say magnetism. It was cold to man. I have spoken about the icy blue of its color. It was cold even to look at. The chemist placed it in my hand.

"Is it not so?"

It was. The minute it touched my palm I could sense the weird horror of the isolation; the stone was cold. Like a piece of ice.

This was the first time I had ever had it in direct contact with the flesh. Set in the ring its impulse had always been secondary.

"You notice it? It is so with me. Now then. Just a minute."

He pressed a button. A young lady answered his ring; she glanced first at myself and then at the chemist.

"Miss Mills, this is Mr. Wendel. He is the owner of the gem. Would you take it in your hand?

"And please tell Mr. Wendel—"

She laughed; she was a bit perplexed.

"I do not understand"—she turned to me—"we had the same dispute yesterday. See, Mr. White says that it is cold; but it is not. It is warm; almost burning. All the girls think as I do."

"And all the men as I do," averred the chemist, "even Mr. Wendel."

"Is it cold to you?" she asked. "Really—"

It was a turn I had not looked for. It was akin to life—this relation to sex. Could it account for the strange isolation and the weariness? I was a witness to its potence. Watson! I could feel myself dragging under. I had just one question:

"Tell me, Miss Mills. Can you sense anything else; I mean beyond its temperature?"

She smiled a bit. "I don't know what you mean exactly. It is a beautiful stone. I would like to have it."

"You think its possession would make you happy?"

Her eyes sparkled.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "I know it would! I can feel it!"

It was so. What ever there was in the bit of sapphirine blue, it had life. What was it? It had relation to sex. In the strict line of fact it was impossible.

When we were alone again I turned to the chemist.

"Is there anything more that you uncovered? Did you see anything in the stone?"

He frowned. "No. Nothing else. This magnetism is the only thing. Is there anything more?"

Now I had not said anything about its one great quality. He had not stumbled across the image of the two men. I could not understand it. I did not tell him. Perhaps I was wrong. Down inside me I sensed a subtle reason for secrecy. It is hard to explain. It was not perverseness; it was a finer distinction; perhaps it was the influence of the gem. I took it back to the jeweler again and had it reset.

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CHAPTER XV

AGAIN THE NERVINA

IT WAS at this point that I began taking notes. There is something psychological to the Blind Spot, weird and touching on to the spirit. I know not what it is; but I can feel it. It impinges on to life. I can sense the ecstasy of horror. I am not afraid. Whatever it is that is dragging me down, it is not evil. My sensations are not normal.

For the benefit of my successor, if there is to be one, I have made an elaborate detail of notes and comments. After all, the whole thing, when brought down to the end, must fall to the function of science. When Hobart arrives, whatever my fate, he will find a complete and comprehensive record of my sensations. I shall keep it up to the end. Such notes being dry and sometimes confusing I have purposely omitted them from this narrative. But there are some things that must be given to the world. I shall pick out the salient parts and give them chronologically.

Jerome stayed with me. Rather I should say he spent the nights with me. Most of the time he was on the elusive trail of the Rhamda. From the minute of our conversation with Kennedy he held to one conviction. He was positive of that chemist back in the nineties. He was certain of the Rhamda. Whatever the weirdness of his theory it would certainly bear investigation. To myself it is too much of Ponce de Leon. Perhaps I might say—of the devil. But Jerome stayed with it. When he was not on the trail over the city he was at work in the cellar. Here we worked together.

We dug up the concrete floor and did a bit of mining. I was interested in the formation.

From the words of Wudge Kennedy the bit of jewel had been discovered at the original excavation. We found the blue clay that he spoke of, but nothing else. Jerome dissected every bit of earth carefully. We have spent many hours in that cellar.

But most of the time I was alone. When not too worn with the loneliness and weariness I worked at my notes. It has been a hard task from the beginning. Inertia, lack of energy! How much of our life is impulse! What is the secret that backs volition? It has been will—willpower from the beginning. I must thank my ancestors. Without the strength and character built up through generations, I would have succumbed utterly.

Even as it is I sometimes think I am wrong in following the dictate of Watson. If I was only sure. I have pledged my word and my honor. What did he know? I need all the reserve of character to hold up against the Nervina. From the beginning she has been my opponent. What is her interest in the Blind Spot, and myself? Who is she? I cannot think of her as evil. She is too beautiful, too tender; her concern is so real. Sometimes I think of her as my protector, that it is she, and she alone, who holds back the power which would engulf me. Once she made a personal appeal.

Jerome had gone. I was alone. I had dragged myself to the desk and my notes and data. It was along toward spring and in the first shadows of the early evening. I had turned on the lights. It was the first labor I had done for several days. I had a great deal of work before me. I had begun some time before to take down my temperature. I was careful of everything now, as much as I could be under the depression. So far I had discerned nothing that could be classed as pathologic.

There is something subtle about the Nervina. She is much like the Rhamda. Perhaps they are the same. I heard no sound. I have no notion of a door or entrance. Watson had said of the Rhamda, "Sometimes you see him, sometimes you don't." It is so with the Nervina. I remember only my working at the data and the sudden movement of a hand upon my desk—a girl's hand. It was bewildering. I looked up.

I had not seen her since that night. It was now eight months—did I not know;

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I would have recorded them as years. Her expression was a bit more sad—and beautiful. The same wonderful glow of her eyes, night-black, and tender; the softness that comes from passion, and love, and virtue. The same wistful droop of the perfect mouth. What a wondrous mass of hair she had! From the first I had been struck with her beauty—the lines of her face and figure—the longing that could not be suppressed—something elusive and ethereal. I dropped my pen. She took my hand. I could sense the thrill of contact; cool and magnetic.

"Harry!"

She said no more; I did not answer; I was too taken by surprise and wonder. She was far above all women; there was such a tenderness in her eyes and such a pity. She was as the Rhamda; she was different. I could feel her concern as I would a mother's. What was her interest in myself? The contact of her hand sent a strange pulse through my vitals; she was so beautiful. Could it be? Watson had said he loved her. Could I blame him?

"Harry," she asked, "how long is it to continue?"

SO THAT was it. Merely an envoy to accept surrender. I was worn utterly, weary of the world, lonely. But I had not given up. I had strength still, and will enough to hold out to the end. Perhaps I was wrong. If I gave her the ring—what then?

"I am afraid," I answered, "that it must go on. I have given my word. It has been much harder than I had expected. This jewel? What has it to do with the Blind Spot?"

"It controls it."

"Does the Rhamda desire it?"

"He does."

"Why does he not call for it personally? Why does he not make a clean breast of it? It would be much easier. He knows and you know that I am after Dr. Holcomb and Watson. I might even forego the secret. Would he release the doctor?"

"No, Harry, he would not."

"I see. If I gave up the ring it would be merely for my personal safety. I am a coward—"

"Oh," she said, "do not say that. You must give the ring to me—not to the Rhamda. It must not control the Blind Spot."

"What is the Blind Spot? Tell me."

"Harry," she spoke, "I cannot. It is not for you or any other mortal. It is a secret that should never have been uncovered. It might be the end. In the hands of the Rhamda it would certainly be the end of mankind."

"Who is the Rhamda? Who are you? You are too beautiful to be merely woman. Are you a spirit?"

She pressed my hand ever so slightly. "Do I feel like a spirit? I am material as much as you are. We live, see—everything."

"But you are not of this world?"

Her eyes grew sadder; a soft longing.

"Not exactly. Harry, not exactly. It is a long story and a very strange one. I may not tell you. It is for your own good. I am your friend"—her eyes were moist—"I—don't you see? Boy, I would save you!"

I did not doubt it. Somehow she was like a girl of dreams, pure as an angel; her wistfulness only deepened her beauty. It came like a shock at the moment. I could love this woman. She was—what was I thinking? My guilty mind ran back to Charlotte. I had loved her since boyhood. I would be a coward—then a wild fear. Perhaps of jealousy.

"The Rhamda? Is he your husband? You are the same—"

"Oh," she answered, "why do you say it?" Her eyes snapped and she grew rigid. "The Rhamda! My husband! If you only knew. I hate him! We are enemies. It was he who opened the Blind Spot. I am here because he is evil. To watch him. I love your world, I love it all. I would save it. I love—"

She dropped her head. Whatever she was, she was not above sobbing. What was the history of this beautiful girl? Who was she?

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I touched her hair; it was of the softest texture I have ever seen; the luster was like all the beauty of night woven into silk. She loved, loved; I could love—I was on the point of surrender.

"Tell me," I asked, "just one thing more. If I give you this ring would you save the doctor and Chick Watson?"

She raised her head; her eyes glistened; but she did not answer.

"Would you?".

She shook her head. "I cannot," she answered. "That cannot be. I can only save you for—for—Charlotte."

Was it vanity in myself? I do not know. It seemed to me that it was hard for her to say it. Frankly, I loved her. I knew it. I loved Charlotte. I loved them both. But I held to my purpose.

"Are the professor and Watson living?"

"They are."

"Are they conscious?"

She nodded. "Harry," she said, "I can tell you that. They are living and conscious. You have seen them. They have only one enemy—the Rhamda. But they must never come out of the Blind Spot. I am their friend and yours."

A sudden courage came upon me. I remembered my word to Watson. I had loved the old professor. I would save them. If necessary I would follow to the end. Either myself or Fenton. One of us would solve it!

"I shall keep the ring," I said. "I shall avenge them. Somehow, somewhere, I feel that I shall do it. Even if I must follow—"

She straightened at that. Her eyes were frightened.

"Oh," she said, "why do you say it? It must not be! You would perish! You shall not do it! I must save you. You must not go alone. Three—it may not be. If you go, I go with you. Pardon my excitement; but I know. Perhaps—oh, Harry!"

She dropped her head again; her body shook with her sobbing; plainly she was a girl. No real man is ever himself in the presence of a woman's tears. I was again on the point of surrender. Suddenly she looked up.

"Harry," she spoke sadly, "I have just one thing to ask. You must see Charlotte. You must forget me; we can never— You love Charlotte. I have seen her; she is a beautiful girl. You have not written. She is worried. Remember your love that has grown out of childhood. It is beautiful and holy. I wish to save you. Remember what you mean to her happiness. Will you go?"

That I could promise.

"Yes, I shall see Charlotte."

"Thanks."

She rose from her chair. I held her hand. Again, as in the restaurant, I lifted it to my lips. She flushed and drew it away. She bit her lip. Her beauty was a kind I could not understand.

"You must see Charlotte," she said, "and you must do as she says."

With that she was gone. There was a car waiting; the last I saw was its winking tail-light dimming into the darkness.

What did this girl mean to me?

CHAPTER XVI

CHARLOTTE

LEFT alone I began thinking of Charlotte. I loved her; of that I was certain. I could not compare her with the Nervina. She was like myself, human, possible. I had known her since boyhood. The other was out of the ether; my love for her was something different; she was of dreams and moonbeams; there was a film about her beauty, illusion; she was of spirit.

I wrote a note to the detective and left it upon my desk. After that I packed a suitcase and hurried to the depot. If I was going I would do it at once. I could not trust myself too far. This visit had been like a breath of air; for the moment I was away from the isolation. The loneliness and the weariness! How I dreaded it! I was only free from it for a few moments. On the train it came back upon me and in a manner that was startling.

I had purchased my ticket. When the conductor came through he passed me. He

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gathered tickets all about me; but he did not notice me. At first I paid no attention; but when he had gone through the car several times I held up my ticket. He did not stop. It was not until I had touched him that he gave me a bit of attention.

"Where have you been sitting?" he asked.

I pointed to the seat. He frowned slightly.

"There?" he asked. "Why? Did you say you were sitting in that seat? Where did you get on?"

"At Townsend."

"Queer," he answered; he punched the ticket and stuck a stub in my hat-band. "Queer. I passed that seat several times. It was empty!"

Empty! It was almost a shock. Could it be that my isolation was becoming physical as well as mental? What was this gulf that was widening between myself and my fellows?

It was the beginning of another phase. I have noticed it many times; on the street, in public places; everywhere. I thread in and out among men. Sometimes they see me, sometimes they don't. It is strange. The oppression of the thing is terrifying—the isolation. I feel at times as though I might be vanishing out of the world!

It was late when I reached my old home; but the lights were still burning. My favorite dog, Queen, was on the veranda. As I came up the steps she growled slightly, but upon recognition went into a series of circles about the porch. My father opened the door. I stepped inside. He touched me on the shoulder, his jaw dropped.

"Harry!" he exclaimed.

Was it as bad as that? How much meaning may be placed in a single intonation! I was weary to the point of exhaustion. The ride upon the train had been too much. I was not sick. Yet I knew what must be my appearance.

My mother came in. For some moments I was busy protesting my health. But it was useless; it was not until I had partaken of a few of the old nostrums that I could placate her.

"Work, work, work, my boy," said my father, "nothing but work. It will not do. You are a shadow. You must take a vacation. Go to the mountains; forget your practice for a short time."

I did not tell them. Why should I? I promised vaguely that I would not labor hard. I decided right then that it was my own battle. It was enough for me without casting the worry upon others. Yet I could not see Charlotte without calling on my parents.

AS SOON as possible I crossed the street to the Fentons. Someone had seen me in town. Charlotte was waiting. She was the same beautiful girl I had known so long; the blue eyes, the blond, wavy mass of hair, the laughing mouth and the gladness. But she was not glad now. It was almost a repetition of what had happened at home, only here a bit more personal. She clung to me almost in terror. I did not realize that I had gone down so much. I knew my weariness; but I had not thought my appearance so dejected. I remembered Watson. He had been wan, pale, forlorn. After what brief explanation I could give, I proposed a stroll in the moonlight.

It was a full moon; a wonderful night; we walked down the avenue under the elm-trees. Charlotte was beautiful, and worried; she clung to my arm with the eagerness of possession. I could not but compare her with the Nervina. There was a contrast; Charlotte was fresh, tender, clinging, the maiden of my boyhood. I had known her all my life; there was no doubt of our love.

Who was the other? She was something higher, out of mystery, out of life—almost —out of the moonbeams. I stopped and looked up. The great full orb was shining. I did not know that I spoke.

"Harry," asked Charlotte, "who is the Nervina?"

Had I spoken?

"What do you know about the Nervina?" I asked.

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"She has been to see me. She told me. She said you would be here to-night. I was waiting. She is very beautiful. I never saw anyone like her. She is wonderful!"

"What did she say?"

"She! Oh, Harry. Tell me. I have waited. Something has happened. Tell me. You have told me nothing. You are not like the old Harry."

"Tell me about the Nervina. What did she say? Come Charlotte, tell me everything. Am I so much different from the old Harry?"

She clutched my arm fearfully; she looked into my eyes.

"Oh," she said, "how can you say it? You haven't laughed once. You are melancholy; you are pale, drawn, haggard. You keep muttering. You are not the old Harry. Is it this Miss Nervina? She was so interested. At first I thought she loved you; but she does not. She wanted to know all about you, about our love. She was so interested. What is this danger?"

I did not answer.

"You must tell me. This ring? She said that you must give it to me. What is it?"

"Did she ask that? She told you to take the ring? My dear," I asked, "if it were the ring and it were so sinister would I be a man to give it to my loved one?"

"It would not hurt me?"

But I would not. Something warned me. It was anything to get it out of my possession. The whole thing was haunting, weird, ghostly. Always I could hear Watson. I had a small quota of courage and willpower. I clung to my purpose.

It was a sad three hours. Poor Charlotte! I shall never forget it. It is the hardest task on earth to deny one's loved one. She had grown into my heart and into its possession. She clung to me tenderly, tearfully. I could not tell her. Her feminine instinct sensed disaster. In spite of her tears I insisted. It had been my last word to Watson. Come what may I would stay with duty. When I kissed her good night she did not speak. But she looked up at me through her tears. It was the hardest thing of all.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SHEPHERD

WHEN I returned to the city next morning I took my dog. It was a strange whim; but one which was to lead to a remarkable development. I have ever been a lover of dogs. I was lonely. There is a bond between a dog and his master. It goes beyond definition; it roots down into nature. I was to learn much.

She was an Australian shepherd. She had been presented to me by a rugby player from New Zealand. The Australian dog is about at the head of dogdom, the result of countless generations of elimination. When man chooses for utility he is inexorable in selection. She was of a tawny black and bob-tailed from birth.

What is the power that lies behind instinct? How far does it go? I had a notion that the dog would be outside the sinister clutch that was dragging me under.

Happily Jerome was fond of dogs. He was reading. When I entered with Queen tugging at the chain he looked up. The dog recognized the heart of the man; when he stooped to pet her she moved her stub tail in an effusion of affectionate acceptance. Jerome had been reading Le Bon's peculiar theory on the evolution of force. His researches after the mystery had led him into the depths of speculation; he had become quite a scholar. After our first greetings I unhooked the chain and let Queen have the freedom of the house. I related what had happened. The detective closed the book and sat down. The dog waited a bit for further petting; but missing that she began sniffing about the room. There was nothing strange about it of course. I myself paid not the slightest attention. But the detective was watching. While I was telling my story he was following every movement of the shepherd. Suddenly he held up one finger. I turned.

It was Queen. A low growl, guttural and suspicious. She was standing about a foot from the portières that separated the library from the other room—where we had

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lost Watson, and where Jerome had had his experience with the old lady. Tense and rigid, one forepaw held up stealthily, her stub tail erect and the hair along her back bristled. Again the low growl. I caught Jerome's eyes. It was queer.

"What is it, Queen?" I spoke.

At the sound of my voice she wagged her tail and looked about; then stepped between the curtains. Just her head. She drew back; her lips drawn from her teeth; snarling. She was rigid, alert, vitalized. Somehow it made me cold. She was a brave dog; she feared nothing. The detective stepped forward and pulled the curtains apart. The room was empty. We looked into each other's faces. What is there to instinct? What is its range? We could see nothing.

But not so the dog. Her eyes glowed. Hate, fear, terror, her whole body rigid.

"I wonder," I spoke. I stepped into the room. But I had not counted on the dog. Her intelligence was out of instinct. With a yelp she was upon me, had me by the calf of the leg and was drawing me back. She stepped in front of me; a low, guttural growl of warning. But there was nothing in that room; of that we were certain.

"Beats me," said the detective. "How does she know? Wonder if she would stop me?" He stepped forward. It was merely a repetition. She caught him by the trouser-leg and drew him back. She crowded us away from the curtain. It was almost magnetic. Now we could not hear a sound. We were both positive; and we were both uncertain. From the very beginning there had been mystery in that apartment. We could see nothing, neither could we feel; was it possible that the dog could see beyond us? The detective spoke first:

"Take her out of the room. Put her in the hall; tie her up."

"What's the idea?"

"Merely this; I am going to examine the room. No, I am not afraid. I'll be almighty glad if it does catch me. Anything so long as I get results."

But it did us no good. We examined the room many times that night; both of us. In the end there was nothing, only the weirdness and uncertainty and the magnetic undercurrent which we could feel, but could not fathom. When we called in the dog she stepped to the portières and commenced her vigil. She crouched slightly back of the curtains, alert, ready, waiting. It was a strange thing from the beginning. Her post of honor. From that moment she never left the spot except under compulsion. We could hear her at all times of the night; the low growl, the snarl, the defiance. She was restless; it was instinct; out of her nature she could sense the strange insidious pregnancy.

But there was a great deal more that we were to learn from the dog. It was Jerome who first called my attention. A small fact at the beginning; but of a strange sequence. This time it was the ring. Queen had the habit that is common to most dogs; she would lap my hand to show her affection. It was nothing in itself; but for one fact—she always chose the left hand. It was the detective who first noticed it. Always and at every opportunity she would lap the jewel. We made little tests to try her. I would remove the ring from one hand to the other; then hold it behind me. She would follow.

It was a strange fact; but of course not inexplicable. A scent or the attraction of taste might account for it. However, these little tests led to a rather remarkable discovery. Were it not that I was a witness and have repeated it many times I would not relate it. What is the line between intelligence and instinct?

One night we had called the dog from her vigil. As usual she came to the jewel; by a mere chance I pressed the gem against her head. It was a mere trifle; yet it was of consequence. A few minutes before I had dropped a handkerchief on the opposite side of the room; I was just then thinking about picking it up. It was only a small thing, yet it put us on the track of the gem's strangest potence. The dog walked to the handkerchief. She brought it back in her mouth. At first I took it for a

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mere coincidence. I repeated the experiment with a book. The same result. I looked up at Jerome.

"What's the matter?" Then when I explained: "The dickens! Try it again."

Over and over again we repeated it, using different articles, pieces of which I was certain she did not know the name. There was a strange bond between the gem and the intelligence, some strange force emanating from its luster. On myself it was depressing; on the dog it was life itself. At last Jerome had an inspiration.

"Try the Rhamda," he said; "think of him. Perhaps—"

It was most surprising. Certainly it was remarkable. It was too much like intelligence; a bit too uncanny. At the instant of the thought the dog leaped backward. Such a transformation; she was naturally gentle. In one instant she had gone mad. Mad? Not in the literal interpretation; but figuratively. She sprang back; snapping; her teeth bared, her hair bristled. Her nostrils drawn. With one bound she leaped between the curtains.

Jerome jumped up. With an exclamation he drew the portières. I was behind him. The dog was standing at the edge of the room. She was bristling; defiance; hate, vigilance. The room was empty. What did she see? What!

ONE thing was certain. Though we were sure of nothing else we were certain of the Rhamda. We could trust the canine's instinct. Every previous experiment that we had essayed had been crowned with success. We had here a fact, but no explanation. If we could only put things together and draw out the law.

I thought of Fenton. If we had only his good, sound head. He was an accumulation of data; from boyhood he had genius for coaxing the concrete out of facts and abstractions. It was not work for a lawyer or a detective, but for a man of science. It is hard to forget the dog and that moment. She was vicious, her whole body bristled with vibrancy and defiance. It was instinct; the subtle force that goes beyond the five senses. I was positive that she could not see; but she knew. Was it the Rhamda?

It was merely a confirmation. From the first we had been certain. The beginning had been coincident with his appearance at the ferry. I had been waiting, and not without dread, for him to strike. He had interfered with Watson. I recalled that night in the restaurant. Why had he not struck at myself? Was it the Nervina? A happy thought came to me at the moment. I would try the Nervina.

With a bit of persuasion we coaxed Queen back into the library. I would again test the strange potency of the gem. I spoke to Jerome.

It was as I suspected.

Instead of madness the dog went into an effusion of delight. It is a fact almost too remarkable to relate. What was this quality that lurked in the jewel? What was the jewel? I had taken it to chemists; not a one could tell me. The Nervina—a friend. It was true. I had always half believed; but I had still doubted. Now I was sure. It was certainly an assurance for Jerome and myself. We had a bit to go on. Perhaps we could patch up the facts and weave some sort of discovery.

It was late when we retired. I could not sleep. The restlessness of the dog held back my slumber. She would growl sullenly, then stir about for a new position; she was never quite still. I could picture her there in the library, behind the curtains, crouched, half resting, half slumbering, always watching. I would waken in the night and listen; a low guttural warning, a sullen whine—then stillness. It was the same with my companion. We could never quite understand it. Perhaps we were a bit afraid.

But one can become accustomed to most anything. It went on for many nights without anything happening, until one night.

It was a dark night; exceedingly dark, with neither moon nor starlight; one of those nights of inky intenseness. It was about one o'clock. I had been awakened about half an hour before. By the light of

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a match I had looked at my watch. It was twelve thirty-five. I remember that distinctly. I cannot say just exactly what woke me. The house was strangely silent and still; the air seemed stretched and laden. It was summer. Perhaps it was the heat. I only knew that I awoke suddenly and blinked in the darkness.

In the next room with the door open I could hear the heavy breathing of the detective. That is all that there was to break the stillness, a heavy feeling lay against my heart. I had grown accustomed to dread and isolation; but this was different. Perhaps it was premonition. I do not know. And yet I was terribly sleepy; I remember that.

I struck a match and looked at my watch on the bureau—twelve thirty-five. No sound—not even Queen—not even a rumble from the streets. I lay back and dropped into slumber. Just as I drifted off into sleep I had a blurring fancy of sound, guttural, whining, fearful—then suddenly drifting into incoherent rumbling fantasms—a dream. I awoke suddenly. Some one was speaking. It was Jerome.

"Harry!"

I was frightened. It was like something clutching out of the darkness. I sat up. I did not answer. It was not necessary. The incoherence of my dream had been external. The library was just below me. I could hear the dog pacing to and fro, and her snarling. Snarling? It was just that. It was something to arouse terror.

She had never growled like that—it was positive, I could hear her suddenly leap back from the curtains. She barked. Never before had she come to that. Then a sudden lunge into the other room—a vicious series of snapping, barks, yelps—pandemonium—I could picture her leaping—at what! Then suddenly I leaped out of bed. The barks grew faint, faint, fainter—into the distance.

IN THE darkness I could not find the switch. I bumped into Jerome. Our contact in the middle of the room upset us. We were lost in our confusion. It was a moment before we could find either a match or a button to turn on the lights. But at last—I shall not forget that moment; nor Jerome. He was rigid; one arm held aloft, his eyes bulged out. The whole house was full of sound—full-toned—vibrant—magnetic. It was the bell.

I jumped for the stairway. But I was not so quick as Jerome. With three bounds we were in the library with the lights turned on. The sound was running down to silence. We tore down the curtains and rushed into the room. It was empty!

There was not even the dog. Queen had gone! In a vain rush of grief I began calling and whistling. It was a flooded moment. The poor, brave shepherd. She had seen it and rushed full into its face.

It was the last night that I was to have Jerome. We sat up until daylight. For the thousandth time we went over the house in detail, but there was nothing. Only the ring. At the suggestion of the detective I touched the match to the sapphire. It was the same. The color diminishing, and the translucent corridors deepening into the distance; the the blur and the coming of shadows—the men, Watson and the professor—and my dog.

Of the men, only the heads showed; but the dog was full figure; she was sitting, apparently on a pedestal, her tongue was lolling out of her mouth and her face full of that gentle intelligence which only the Australian shepherd is heir to. That is all—no more—nothing. If we had hoped to discover anything through her medium we were disappointed. Instead of clearing up, the whole thing had grown deeper.

I have said that it was the last night that I was to have Jerome. I did not know it then. Jerome went out early in the morning. I went to bed. I was not afraid in the daylight. I was certain now that the danger was localized. As long as I kept out of that apartment I had nothing to fear. Nevertheless, the thing was magnetic. A subtle weirdness pervaded the building. I did not sleep soundly. I was lonely; the isolation was crowding in on me. In the afternoon I stepped out on the streets.

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I have spoken of my experience with the conductor. On this day I had the certainty of my isolation; it was startling. In the face of what I was and what I had seen it was almost terrifying. It was the first time I thought of sending for Hobart. I had thought I could hold out. The complete suddenness of the thing set me to thinking. I thought of Watson. It was the last phase, the feebleness, the wanness, the inertia! He had gone down through exhaustion. He had been a far stronger man than I in the beginning. I had will-power, strength of mind to hold me if it would continue.

I must cable Fenton. While I had still an ego in the presence of men, I must reach out for help. It was a strange thing and inexplicable. I was not invisible. Don't think that. I simply did not individualize. Men did not notice me—till I spoke. As if I were imperceptibly losing the essence of self. I still had some hold to the world. While it remained I must get word to Hobart. I did not delay. Straight to the office I went and paid for the cable.

Cannot hold out much longer. Come at once.
Harry.

I was a bit ashamed. I had hoped I had counted upon myself. I had trusted in the full strength of my individuality. I had been healthy—strong—full blooded. On the fulness of vitality one would live forever. There is no tomorrow. It was not a year ago. I was eighty. It had been so with Watson. What was this subtle thing that ate into one's marrow? I had read of banshees, lemures and leprechauns; they were the ghosts and the fairies of ignorance; but they were not like this. It was impersonal, hidden, inexorable. It was mystery. And I believed that it was Nature.

I knew it now. Even as I write I can sense the potence of the force about me. It has overcome the professor. It has crushed down Watson. Some law, some principle, some force that science has not uncovered. The last words of the doctor: "I shall bring the occult into the concrete; for your senses. You shall have the proof and the substance."

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What is that law that shall bridge the chaos between the mystic and the substantial? I am standing on the bridge; and I cannot see it. What is the great law that was discovered by Dr. Holcomb? Who is the Rhamda? Who is the Nervina?

Jerome has not returned. I cannot understand it. It has been a week. I am living on brandy—not much of anything else—I am waiting for Fenton. I have taken all my elaborations and notes and put them together. Perhaps I—

This is the last of the strange document left by Harry Wendel. The following memorandum is written by Charlotte Fenton.

CHAPTER XVIII

CHARLOTTE'S STORY

I DO not know. It is so hard to write after what has happened. I am but a girl; and I cannot think as men do; much less analyze. I do not understand.

Hobart says that it is why I am to write it. It is to be a plain narrative. Besides, he is very busy and cannot do it himself. It was Harry's intention and is that of Hobart that the world shall know of the Blind Spot. There must be some record. I shall do my best and hold out of my writing as much as I can of my emotion. I shall start in with the Nervina.

It was the first I knew; the first warning. Looking back I cannot but wonder. No person I think who has ever seen the Nervina can do much else; she is so beautiful! Beautiful? Why do I say it? I should be jealous and I should hate her; it is the way of woman. Yet I do not. Why is it?

It was about eight months after Hobart had left for South America. I remember those eight months as the longest of my life; because of Harry. I am a girl and I like attention; all girls do. Ordinarily he would come over every fortnight at least. After Hobart had gone he came once only. Instead of calling personally, he wrote letters. We were to be married, and of course I resented the inattention.

It seemed to me that no business could be of enough importance if he really loved me. Even his letters were few and far between. What he wrote were slow and weary and of an undertone that I could not fathom. I had all of the girl's wild fears and fancies. I—loved Harry. I could not understand it. I had a thousand fearful thoughts and jealousies; but they were feminine and in no way approximated even the beginning of the truth. Inattention was not like Harry. It was not until the coming of the Nervina that I was afraid.

Afraid? I will not say that—exactly. It was rather a suspicion, a queer undercurrent of wonder and doubt. The beauty of the girl, her interest in Harry and myself, her concern over this ring, put me a bit on guard. I wondered what this ring had to do with Harry Wendel.

She did not tell me in exact words or in literal explanation; but she managed to convey all too well a lurking impression of its sinister potence. It was something baleful, something the very essence of which would break down the life of the one who wore it. Harry had come into its possession by accident and she would save him. She had failed through direct appeal. Now she had come to me.

She was very beautiful, the most wonderful girl I had ever seen, and the most magnetic. If I may follow Harry's words, she was superfeminine. Certainly she was that. A bit too wistful and of spirit to make one jealous. She did not say a word of the Blind Spot. All I knew was her wonderful beauty, and the tender delicacy of her manner.

And the next day came Harry. It was really a shock. Though I had been warned by the girl I was not half afraid until I saw him. He was not Harry at all, but another. His eyes were dim and they had lost their luster; when they did show light at all, it was of a kind that was a bit fearful. He was wan, worn, and gone to a shadow, as if he had gone through a long illness.

He said that he had not been sick. He maintained that he was quite well physically. I was afraid. And on his finger was

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this ring of which the girl had spoken. Its value must have been incalculable. Wherever he moved his hand its blue flame cut a path through the darkness. But he said nothing about it. I waited and wondered and was afraid. It was not until our walk under the elm-trees that it was mentioned.

It was a full moon; a wonderful, mellow moon of summer. He stopped suddenly and gazed up at the orb above us. It seemed to me that his mind was wandering, he held me closely—tenderly. He was not at all like Harry. There was a missing of self, of individuality; he spoke in abstractions.

"The maiden of the moonbeams?" he spoke. "What can it mean?"

And then I asked him. He has already told of our conversation. It was the ring of which the Nervina had told me. It had to do with the Blind Spot—the great secret that had taken Dr. Holcomb. It was his duty that he had sworn to another. In the ring lurked the power of disintegration. He would not give it to me. I worked hard, for even then I was not afraid of it. Something told me—I must do it to save him. It was weird, and something I could not understand—but I must do it for Harry.

I failed. Though he was broken in every visible way there was one thing as strong as ever—his honor. He had ever that. It had always been the strong part of Harry; when he had given his word naught could break it. He would neither lie nor quibble; he was not afraid; he had been the same in his boyhood. When we parted that night he kissed me. I shall never forget how long he looked into my eyes, nor his sadness. That is all. The next morning he left for San Francisco.

And then came the end. A message; abrupt and sudden. It was some time after and it put a period to my increasing stress and worry. It read:

> City of Peru docks to-night at eight forty-two. Meet me at the pier. Hobart coming.
>
> Harry.

It was a short message and a bit twisted. Under ordinary circumstances he would have motored down and brought me back to greet Hobart. It was a bit strange that I should meet him at the pier. However, I had bare time to get to the city if I hurried.

I shall never forget that night.

It was dark when I reached San Francisco. I went up by way of Oakland and Niles and took the ferry across the bay. I was a full twenty minutes early at the pier. A few people were waiting. I looked about for Harry. He was to meet me and I was certain that I would find him. But he was not there. Of course there was still time. He was sure to be on hand to greet Hobart.

Nevertheless, I had a vague mistrust. Since that strange visit I had not been sure. Harry was not well. There was something to this mystery that he had not told me. I am a girl, of course, and it was possible that I could not understand it. Yet I would that I knew. Why had he asked me to meet him at the pier? Why did he not come? When the boat docked and he was still missing I was doubly worried.

HOBART came down the gangplank. He was great, strong, healthy, and it seemed to me in a terrible hurry. He scanned the faces hurriedly and ran over to me.

"Where's Harry?" He kissed me and in the same breath repeated, "Where's Harry?"

"Oh, Hobart!" I exclaimed. "What is the matter with Harry? Tell me. It is something terrible! I do not know."

He was afraid. Plainly I could see that! There were lines of anxiety about his eyes. He clutched me by the arm and drew me away.

"He was to meet me here," I said. "He did not come. He was to meet me here! Oh, Hobart, I saw him a short time ago. He was—it was not Harry at all! Do you know anything about it? He said he would meet me at the pier. Why did he not come? What is it?"

For a minute he stood still, looking at

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me. I had never seen Hobart frightened; but at that moment there was that in his eyes which I could not understand. He caught me by the arm and started out almost on a run. There were many people and we dodged in and out and among them. Hobart carried a suitcase. He hailed a taxi.

I do not know how I got into the car. It is a blur. I was frightened. The whole thing was unusual. Some terrible thing had occurred, and Hobart knew it. I remember a few words spoken to the driver. "Speed, speed, no limit; never mind the law—and Chatterton!" After that the convulsive jerking over the cobbled streets, a climbing over hills and twisted corners. And Hobart at my side. "Faster—faster," he was saying; "faster! My Lord, was there ever a car so slow! Harry! Harry!" I could hear him breathing a prayer. "Oh, for a minute." Another hill; the car turned and came suddenly to a stop! Hobart leaped out.

A somber two-story house; a light burning in one of the windows, a dim light, almost subdued and uncanny. I had never seen anything so lonely as that light; it was gray, uncertain, scarcely a flicker. Perhaps it was my nerves. I had scarcely strength to climb the steps that led up from the sidewalk. Hobart grasped the knob and thrust open the door; I can never forget it. The dim light, the room, the desk and the man! Harry!

Harry! It is hard to write. The whole thing! The room; the walls lined with books; the dim, pale light; the faded green carpet, and the man. Pale, worn, shadowed, almost a semblance. Was it Harry Wendel? He had aged forty years. He was stooped, withered, exhausted. A bottle of brandy on the desk before him. In his weak, thin hand an empty wine-glass. The gem upon his finger glowed with a flame that was almost wicked; it was blue, burning, giving out sparkles of light—like a color out of hell. The path of its light was unholy—it was too much alive.

We both sprang forward. Hobart seized him by the shoulders.

"Harry, old boy; Harry! Don't you know us? It is Hobart and Charlotte."

It was terrible. He did not seem to know. He looked right at us. But he spoke in abstractions.

"Two," he said. And he listened. "Two! Don't you hear it?" He caught Hobart by the arm. "Now, listen. Two! No, it's three. Did I say three? Can't you hear? 'Tis the old lady. She speaks out of the shadows. There! There! Now, listen. She has been counting to me. Always she says three! Soon 'twill be four."

What did he mean? What was it about? Who was the old lady? I looked around. I saw no one. Hobart stooped over. I began crying. He began slowly to recognize us. It was as if his mind had wandered and was coming back from a far place. He spoke slowly; his words were incoherent and rambling.

"Hobart," he said; "you know her. She is the maiden out of the moonbeams. The Rhamda, he is our enemy. Hobart, Charlotte. I know so much. I cannot tell you. You are two hours late. It is a strange thing. I have found it and I think I know. It came suddenly. The discovery of the great professor. Why did you not come two hours earlier? We might have conquered."

He dropped his head upon his arms; then as suddenly he raised up. He drew the ring from his finger.

"Give it to Charlotte," he said. "It will not hurt her. Do not touch it yourself. Had I only known. Watson did not know—"

He straightened; he was tense, rigid, listening.

"Do you hear anything? Listen! Can you hear? 'Tis the old lady. There—"

But there was not a sound; only the rumble of the streets, the ticking of the clock, and our heart-beats. Again he went through the counting.

"Hobart!"

"Yes, Harry."

"And Charlotte! The ring—ah, yes, it was there. Keep it. Give it to no one. Two hours ago we might have conquered. But I had to keep the ring. It was too much, too powerful; a man may not wear it.

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Charlotte"—he took my hand and ran the ring upon my finger. "Poor Charlotte, you have loved me, girl, all your life. I have loved you. Here is the ring. The most wonderful—"

Again he dropped over. He was weak—there was something going from him minute by minute.

"Water," he asked. "Water? Hobart, some water."

It was too pitiful. Harry. Our Harry—come to a strait like this! Hobart rushed to another room with the tumbler. I could hear him fumbling. I stooped over Harry. But he held up his hand.

"No, Charlotte, no. You must not. If—"

He stopped. Again the strange attention, as if he were listening to something far off in the distance; the pupils of his hollow, worn, lusterless eyes were pin-points. He stood on his feet rigid, quivering; then he held up his hand. "Listen!"

But there was nothing. It was as it was before; merely the murmuring of the city night, and the clock ticking.

"It is the dog! Do you hear her? And the old lady. Now, listen, 'Two! Now there are two! Three! Three! Now there are three!' There—now." He turned to me. "Can you hear it, Charlotte? No? It is strange. Perhaps—" He pointed to the corner of the room. "That paper. Will you—"

I shall always go over that moment. I have thought over it many times and have wondered at the sequence. Had I not stepped across the library, what would have happened? What was it?

I had stooped to pluck up the piece of paper. A queer, crackling, snapping sound, almost audible. I have a strange recollection of Harry standing up by the side of the desk—a flitting vision. An intuition of some terrible force. It was out of nothing—nowhere—approaching. I turned about. And I saw it—the dot of blue.

Blue! That is what it was at first. Blue and burning, like the flame of a million jewels centered into a needlepoint. On the ceiling directly above Harry's head. It was scintillating, coruscating, opalescent; but it was blue most of all. It was the color of life and of death; it was burning, throbbing, concentrated. I tried to scream. But I was frozen with horror. The dot changed color and went to a dead-blue. It seemed to grow larger and to open. Then it turned to white and dropped like a string of incandescence, touching Harry on the head.

What was it? It was all so sudden. A door flung open and a swish of rushing silk. A woman! A woman! A beautiful girl! The front door opened. And the Nervina! It was she!

Never have I seen anyone like her. She was so beautiful. In her face all the compassion a woman is heir to. For scarcely a second she stopped.

"Charlotte," she called. "Charlotte—oh, why did you not save him! He loves you!" Then she turned to Harry. "It shall not be. He shall not go alone. I shall save him; even beyond—"

With that she rushed upon Harry. It was all in an instant. Her arms were outstretched. The dimming form of Harry and the incandescence. The splendid impassioned girl. Their forms intermingled. A blur of her beautiful body and Harry's wan, weary face. A flash of light, a thread of incandescence, a quiver—and they were gone.

THE next I knew was the strong arms of my brother Hobart. He gave me the water that he had fetched for Harry. He was terribly upset, but very calm. He held the glass up to my lips. He was speaking.

"Don't worry, sis. Don't worry. I know now. I think I know. I was just in time to see them go. I heard the bell. Harry is safe. Is is the Nervina. I shall get Harry. We'll solve the Blind Spot."

TO BE CONTINUED

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WEIRD TRAVEL TALES

Tragic Fate of Those Who Sought the Lost Lemon Mine

By BOB DAVIS

II

Old Man River,
Canadian Rockies.

"YES, I'm a prospector," confessed the man who came along the trail leading a burro, "and I hope some day to strike it rich. Quartz or placer; it makes no difference to me. But I am not looking for the lost Lemon Mine."

"How come, stranger?" I asked.

"Because it is cursed. You know the story?"

"I have heard of the lost Pegleg, the Breyfogle, the Blue Bucket and the Ash Canyon, but the Lemon is a new one," I confessed. "Give me the tale."

"Goes back sixty-five years or thereabouts. Two miners from Montana, prospecting between Old Man River and the Highwood, were told by some Blackfoot Indians that the nuggets worn among their ornaments had come from the neighboring canyons. That was enough to send them hot foot into the hills. The two partners, working separately, covered considerable territory.

"One day Lemon struck a rich placer, from which he took a poke bag full of nuggets. Returning to camp, he displayed the stuff to his friend, whose name I cannot recall, pointed out the canyon in which the find was made, but refused to fix the exact location. 'I'm your partner, and a half owner,' said the other fellow. 'I found the float gold, and it's up to you to find the quartz lead,' urged Lemon. 'When you locate that we're millionaires. The true vein is somewhere above the placer.'

"Operating separately, both men went back in search of the fountain head. Lemon's partner stumbled on the real thing, and returning to the camp with rich specimens told Lemon emphatically that the thing to do was to carry out as much gold as they could gather from the placer, buy tools, lay in a stock of food, come back in the spring and open up the mine of high-grade quartz. They quarreled over that proposition and quit speaking to each other. One night while his partner was asleep in the tent Lemon killed him with an ax, took all the nuggets and rich quartz that had been collected and made his way back to Montana, where in the open market he sold $27,000 worth of raw gold.

"NEWS of the strike spread rapidly. Lemon organized a small party to visit the property. Within two days' journey of the Golconda he went raving crazy, revealing in his madness the details of the murder. All efforts to restore his mental balance failed. He died, leaving no hint of the exact whereabouts of the bonanza beyond the fact that it was in Alberta somewhere between Old Man River and the Highwood. Nobody knows how many miners have since gone in search of it. There is a belief among prospectors that bad luck comes to the man who hunts for the Lemon mine."

"Is that belief justified?" I inquired.

"I'll say it is! Look at the case of old man French, one of the best mining men in Canada. He knew the country and was familiar with all the facts and rumors bearing on the subject. The idea that bad

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luck and disaster followed in the wake of those who tried to solve the mystery seemed bunk to him. In 1917 one of his friends grubstaked him to go into the mountains and make a serious attempt to locate the lost mine. He was gone all summer and late in the fall returned with the announcement that he had found both the placer and the quartz lead.

"To his backer he wrote a letter arranging an appointment, upon which occasion he intended to reveal the secret. That night the curse, or the jinx, or whatever you wish to call it, got in its work at the very bedside of the returned prospector. The sparks from his pipe ignited the bed clothing, which burst into flames. The cabin was destroyed, and French fled into a night that registered thirty degrees below zero.

"CLAD only in an undershirt, he walked three and a half miles to the old Brown-Beddingfield ranch homestead, and crawled into the haymow. He was found unconscious the next day and taken to the hospital at High River, where, after lingering a few days, he died of pneumonia. His friend and patron, fearing that any question concerning the whereabouts of the lost mine would result seriously, declined to cross examine the holder of the great secret. You can see how it worked out. I don't want any of that El Dorado. French passed away, leaving nothing to guide those to come after."

"Has the searching ceased?"

"Not entirely. A few miners still talk about the mine and several have actually gone, let us say, halfway along the beaten route, but they always get lost at the other end. Three Indians who undertook to follow the trail of the white man met mysterious deaths. None can be found today who will have anything to do with a miner who is looking for the lost Lemon Mine."

"And you honestly believe that its discovery would be accompanied with disaster?" I asked.

"Worse than that," replied the prospector. "I believe the hoodoo to be so deadly that the minute a man starts out to find the infernal thing he is finished."

"Then you are superstitious?"

"Of all blood money," he answered, slapping the burro on the hip, "and the Lemon gold is red with it."

At that I hope he strikes something half as good.

BIG BOY TAKES A TIP
BOB: Say, fellow, are you taking Ex-Lax? Thought that was for women and kids.
JIM: Wrong, Big Boy! I've been taking Ex-Lax for years. It fixes me up fine!
BOB: Oh yeah! Well, I'm pretty husky . . . I need a laxative with a wallop.
JIM: Don't kid yourself! Ex-Lax tastes good, but it's plenty effective!
LATER
BOB: Thanks for the tip, pal! I tried Ex-Lax and it's great stuff!
JIM: What did I tell you! It's the only laxative we ever use in our family.
The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet gentle! No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax next time you need a laxative. It's good for every member of the family.
10¢ and 25¢
EX-LAX
THE CHOCOLATED LAXATIVE

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He seized one of the loathsome bell-jars, and hurled it into the creature's yawning maw

The Beast Plants

By H. THOMPSON RICH

What were the silent monstrosities that stalked the Georgia swamp and held a girl imprisoned? Neil Huntley found that the horrible truth of the devilish plants far exceeded the most nightmarish rumors

WHEN the first wild rumors about the beast plants began coming out of Okefenokee Swamp, in Southeast Georgia, intelligent men refused to credit them. If the newspapers ran the stories at all, it was in facetious vein.

"Flowers like dinosaurs?" they scoffed. "A new idea for the D. T.'s!"

But there was one intelligent man who gave these rumors full credence, astounding though they were. That was Neil Huntley, assistant professor of biology at Hartford University, Connecticut.

The reason he believed the reports was because he connected them with the mysterious disappearance the year before of Professor Hiram Mortimer, head of the biology department at Hartford.

With the learned professor had gone his charming and talented daughter, Doris. They had left the university at the end of the spring term on a research expedition whose objective was kept a secret even from Huntley himself—and had not been heard from since.

Huntley knew Professor Mortimer had been conducting experiments on mutations —the development of new species—of

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carnivorous plants. And Huntley knew that one of the most peculiar species of this meat-eating plant family was found only in the swamps of the Carolinas and Georgia.

Dionæa was its name—Venus's flytrap it is more commonly called—that amazing plant whose leaves have the power to close on luckless insects like the jaws of a steel trap.

Putting two and two together, Huntley concluded that it was to Okefenokee Swamp that Professor Mortimer had gone to carry out his researches. He resolved to follow him there, learn what grisly Frankenstein monsters the professor's experiments had created—learn, too, if possible, what fate had befallen him and his daughter.

HUNTLEY tried to assure himself, on the way down on the train, that his motives were purely scientific, impersonal. That he would do the same for any fellow professor; but he couldn't put the memory of Doris Mortimer out of his mind.

He recalled how lovely she was, in her dark, slender way. Recalled their friendship, their many talks, walks, rides, dances.

He had expected her to write, when she went away with her father that spring a year ago; but never a post card, let alone a letter. She could not have disappeared more completely if she'd taken a rocket and hopped off for Mars.

He'd thought it odd, at first. Now he was actually worried. What he was going to find down there in that vast, dismal swamp he didn't exactly know, but he was prepared for the worst.

One thing he found, even in Savannah, was that the rumors that had percolated into the Northern papers were mild compared with those current locally. By the time he reached Waycross the tales had become utterly mad and fantastic.

The town was full of white, black and Indian refugees—and the horrible tales they told of what had driven them from their native haunts in Okefenokee's depths were on every tongue. Some of their friends, who had fled at the same time, were missing.

Huntley talked with some of them. Their eyes still wide with terror, they told of ravenous plants like mighty crabs, with a dozen deadly claws. Plants that spread over the marshy ground like hydra-headed dragons, seizing, devouring everything in reach, birds, beasts, reptiles, even men.

He shuddered as he listened to these hysterical tales. He wanted to discount them, to believe they were grossly exaggerated by the panic-stricken natives. But the descriptions sounded so much like some giant—and mobile—species of *Dionæa,* that he was forced to conclude Professor Mortimer's experiments had met with a ghastly success.

Neil found it impossible to get guides to go into the swamp with him, as may well be imagined. The "crackers" whom he approached looked at him as though they thought he was crazy. What? Go back there again, when they'd barely escaped with their lives? Not for any damn-Yankee ever born!

So he told them he would go in alone, whereupon they knew he was crazy. Even if he escaped the beast plants, he would never come out, they warned him. There were parts of that great swamp marked on official government maps as "impenetrable" and unexplored. The natives called it "trembling earth," because it literally shook when you put foot on it. One misstep, anywhere over that swamp's whole area of hundreds of miles, might mean horrible death in a bottomless quagmire.

Huntley thanked them for their words of caution, but insisted, nevertheless, that he was going—for he was sure that somewhere in the reaches of that foul morass were Professor Mortimer and Doris.

The morning after his arrival in Waycross, Huntley entered the swamp, carrying a pack with sleeping-bag and equipment on his back and a shotgun under his arm.

He had chosen this weapon instead of a rifle, not only because it would be more useful in bringing down small game and

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wild fowl, but because he believed it would prove more effective against the beast plants.

What truth lay in this belief, Huntley was to learn much sooner than he expected.

Toward noon, after trudging for some hours over quaking bogs where cypress and black gum reared their swollen trunks out of the muck, he emerged on the edge of one of those small open areas known as "prairies"—and there, at a distance of perhaps a hundred yards, he saw a sight that caused his blood to chill.

It was a plant, undoubtedly a *Dionœa,* but a prodigious size, its mighty circlet of trap-ended leaves measuring fully forty feet across. From the center rose a great shaggy stalk some twenty feet high, with a huge pendulous bud at its crest, like a giant head.

The leaves of the monster had the typical division of the species, he noted in that tense moment—the lower part broad and spatulate, the outer end divided in two lobes. This trap or "claw" of each leaf bore mammoth spines at the edges; and any one of those huge jaws was capable of seizing a full-grown man in its hideous grip.

THE colossal plant stood motionless at first, and Huntley thought with relief that it must be rooted to the soil, like a normal plant. Then he plunged into a nightmare world when he saw the huge bud turn and seem to stare at him as if with malice through its half-open tip. The next instant its dozen mighty leaf-legs were in crablike motion; it was rushing toward him at a dizzying speed.

There was but one thing to do. Raising his shotgun, he fired both barrels into the oncoming monster.

He might almost as well have fired into the air. Only for an instant was the charge of the grisly thing checked. Then, its towering head-stalk vibrating with fury, it continued its mad rush.

Huntley took to his heels. But no use. The plant made ten yards to his one. Almost before he was well under way he felt himself seized by those horrible appendages.

So this was the end—the fate of the professor and his daughter themselves, no doubt, had long since experienced. He tensed, expecting any moment to feel one of those deadly traps close on him, its foot-long spikes pierce him through and through.

But nothing of the sort happened. Instead, as he vainly tried to move and free himself, he was startled to see another beast of the same type draw up.

The two monsters stood there for some time, nodding and gesticulating, apparently debating what they should do with him. The one that had captured him seemed in favor of dispatching him at once, for he could feel the wounded plant tremble as with suppressed rage. The other, however, appeared to protest vigorously, almost as if urging a plan of its own.

Abruptly the naturalist was lifted up and borne off through the swamp by his wrathful captor, his savior following at its side.

For miles the two beasts continued their swift but crablike progress.

Well toward noon they drew up on a sandy knoll rising out of the muck. There he was released and permitted to stretch his cramped, aching limbs. But if he had entertained even the slightest hope of escape, it was soon dispelled; for now other members of the hideous species began gathering.

They formed a circle around him, as though curious to see what strange creature had been brought into their midst. Presently a macabre conference began, evidently concerned with the exact form of his doom.

But in the midst of these eerie rustlings and raspings, salvation came—salvation so dramatic, so astounding, that Neil Huntley at first could scarce believe his eyes.

The circle parted, and in stepped Doris Mortimer.

"Neil!" she cried, rushing up to him.

"Doris!" he echoed, noting with amazement the awe in which the monsters seemed to hold her.

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She extended her hands, murmured, as he took them: "I 'felt all along you'd come!"

"But you never wrote. Why?"

"I couldn't. For months, daddy wouldn't let me. He didn't want anyone, not even you, to know where he was. And then—then it was impossible."

Her voice shook, as she spoke the last words, and Huntley understood — or thought he did.

"You mean you've been the prisoner of these ghastly beasts?"

She shuddered. "No, not their prisoner, Neil—their queen!"

He shuddered, too. "Queen? Good Lord! How can that be?"

"Simple enough. Daddy brought them into being, you see, when he succeeded so horribly this spring in the experiments begun last summer. And with the almost-human intelligence he gave them, they worshipped him from the very first as their creator, their god."

"How awful!"

"Poor Daddy. He suffered the torments of a damned soul. It drove him into his grave."

So Professor Mortimer was dead. What a retribution, for tampering with the laws of nature! He strove vainly for adequate words of sympathy.

But she understood.

"It is better so. His mind had gone, Neil; broke under the strain. And now I am their queen—Heaven help me!"

"I see." No wonder they held her in such awe! "But isn't there some hope, some chance of escape?"

"I don't know. I wonder. But we can't talk about it here. They have such uncanny brains, in those horrid buds of theirs. I—I'm almost afraid they may understand what we are saying." She forced a dreary smile. "Suppose we adjourn to the palace of the queen?"

"Yes, let's!" Huntley agreed.

"Let's get out of their sight for a while, before I go mad myself."

She linked an arm in his, held up the other.

The circle parted. Rustling and rasping, the beast plants let them pass, and escorted them, like a guard of honor—or a file of executioners.

She led him across the knoll to a low frame shack like an army barracks, halfway down the far slope.

"Daddy's laboratory, and our home for the past year," she said as they entered. "We had some colored boys who helped him build it, but they fled this spring, when the new plants began to grow huge and break loose from their roots. Perhaps some of them got out of the swamp alive. Was that how you heard?"

He told her of the wild rumors that had reached the outside world, and how he had deduced that it must have been to Okefenokee she and her father had gone, when they left the university the year before.

"But tell me what happened here," he said when he had finished. "How did your poor father succeed in producing this giant species of *Dionœa?*"

"I DON'T know exactly," she began, when they had taken seats in the little living-room where they had been standing, "but the process was based on the results of his Hartford experiments on mutations that could produce utterly new species. You remember how he disagreed with Mendel's laws and said Burbank was more nearly on the right track?"

"Yes, I remember."

"But even Burbank had only touched the fringes of what was possible along those lines, daddy said. You remember his theory that it was possible to produce mutations without crossing existing species?"

"Yes, I remember that, too."

"Well, the changes daddy wanted to produce were those that would increase the size, mobility, and intelligence of the species. He chose the carnivorous plants because they seemed particularly well adapted to such experiments. And the reason he selected *Dionœa* for his final test was because he could work with it down here in secrecy."

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"Also I presume, because it already had marked mobility of the fly-trap portion of its leaves, I can understand how he might have stimulated this mobility and also increased the plant's size. But I can't understand," and Huntley was emphatic about this, "how your father could have created an intelligence that didn't exist before."

"But it did exist," said Doris, almost with a shudder. "Don't mobility and intelligence go hand in hand? Can anything move that hasn't nervous energy, and isn't that just another name for brain power?"

"No, it isn't brain power, it's reflex action. That's just the difference between plants and animals—that lack of a general nervous system to receive and transmit impulses."

"But plants do have just such a system," she insisted. "Darwin hinted at it when he said that the impulse to motion of *Dionœa* is transmitted along the fibro-vascular bundles. And currents flow through leaves much as they do through the nerves of animals. So there!"

"I surrender. Guess I'll have to, anyway, since your father has proved it so overwhelmingly. Come to think of it, some noted East Indian botanist has demonstrated that plants have a circulatory system, as well as a nervous system—a heart and a brain, of a sort."

"It's not the size of those horrid things," she burst forth, "or even their deadliness, that terrifies me most. It's their intelligence. That is prodigious, in its way."

"I can easily believe it. But go on," Huntley urged. "Tell me how your father produced them."

Haltingly she explained how he had selected the largest, hardiest specimens of the fly-trap which he could find, and had nurtured them all through the previous summer, supplying them through lobes with chemical compounds rich in the nitrogen the swampy soil lacked. This developed the leaves at the expense of the roots, which partially atrophied. Thus was the mobility of the next generation stimulated.

Then, when these favored specimens came into flower, he bred them together by cross-pollination. Then, when the seeds formed and were ready to drop, he gathered them carefully, took them to his laboratory and soaked them in solutions of his invention which should stimulate the size of the next generation.

"Soaked them till they got as big as marbles," said Doris: "as big as baseballs!"

Huntley gasped.

"Oh, I was afraid then," she went on. "I had a sort of premonition. I urged, begged daddy to leave. But he said he wasn't going back to the university at all; was going to stay and continue his work, and nothing I could say would change him. Well, I couldn't leave him here."

Then had come the treatment of the giant seeds to stimulate the intelligence of the next generation—a process the professor kept secret even from his daughter.

"But haven't you even an idea of what he did?" asked Huntley.

"Not anything at all clear," she replied. "I know he cut them, though, and grafted things inside—brain cells, maybe. But all through this part of his experiments, daddy acted so peculiarly that I thought at times he was losing his mind. Perhaps he was, poor dear."

So the fall had passed, and the winter. A torture of boredom to Doris, an ecstatic trance for her father.

"That, really, is about all," she finished. "Daddy planted his dreadful seeds in the early spring. They began to sprout very soon, began to grow terribly fast. Then the horror started. For, as you know, he succeeded beyond his wildest dreams in all three of the mutations he set out to produce. He succeeded so harrowingly that his reason toppled, and before the end of spring—"

Her voice broke off, her lips trembled.

Huntley touched her hand. "I know how close you were to him, what a loss it is. But now, our first thought must be of escape. Not only to save ourselves, but to warn the outside world that these rumors

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coming from Okefenokee Swamp are the truth."

"But how? I have already tried it twice. They watch me constantly. Even now we are guarded. Look!"

She indicated the front window. He looked—and there lurked a pair of the beasts, within fifty yards.

"And look!"

She indicated the rear window, this time. Again he looked, and there lurked two more of them.

Huntley turned back to her.

"The queen's palace is indeed well guarded!" He laughed ironically. "Nevertheless, I think abdication is in order. How about trying to escape at night? Can the infernal things see in the dark?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I think they can see and hear everything—rather, sense it somehow, through adjustment to the most delicate vibrations."

"But plants as a rule aren't much on night life. Let's try it, tonight—that is, if you really want to take a chance. But don't let your prime minister force you to abdicate against your better judgment."

"I'd sooner die than go on here, with these monstrosities. But I tremble to think what may happen if we get caught."

"But it would be worse horror to stay here."

WHEN the long afternoon and the brief twilight had given way to darkness, they set forth.

Not a beast plant was visible, and a heavy silence brooded upon the swamp. Carefully they picked their way around the edge of the knoll, plunged into the depths of the quaking morass.

The night was moonless, but a myriad of stars gleamed in the clear summer sky—and one of these, the Pole Star, guided their footsteps northward.

Silently they proceeded, cautiously, but more than once they slipped and floundered in the black muck. There was one time when it was all he could do to draw her back from the deadly grasp of an oozing quagmire.

But at last—it must have been midnight or later—they emerged upon a sandy knoll similar to the one that had marked their starting-point. Mounting to its crest, they beheld a sight that filled them with joy.

Beyond, on the edge of the swamp, a scant mile or so to the north, twinkled the lights of a village.

Doris drew a deep breath, stood there silent.

"Only a little farther, and we're safe!" said Huntley.

"Yes, only a little farther!" She pressed his hands impulsively. "Oh, Neil, how can I ever thank you enough for saving me?"

He was tempted to take her into his arms then and there, tell her how she could thank him enough. Tell her it was love that had been in his heart, had led him on.

But now was no time to delay for such a declaration. He simply returned the pressure of her hands, and said:

"You don't have to thank me at all, Doris. I'm saving myself too, am I not? Come, we'd best be going."

They descended the knoll, plunged once more into the swamp.

Almost a mile they made, spirits soaring momentarily, when of a sudden, came a sound that filled them with terror—an unmistakable crunching, crashing noise from behind.

They paused, looked at each other, faces pale in the starlight.

"They've discovered we're gone!" she whispered. "They're on our trail!"

"Yes, but we won't give in!" he whispered back. "Quick—with me."

Gripping her hand, he broke into a run. They plunged on, tripping over roots, and vines, slipping into sloughs and muckholes, straining every muscle in a desperate dash for safety. But every moment the ominous sounds behind were drawing nearer.

"Oh, I—I can't go on—any more!" she panted, at length.

He bent, lifted her up, staggered on.

There was still hope! The edge of the

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swamp was in sight. "Only a little farther!" Huntley gasped.

He stopped short. Two of the giant creatures had burst out of the tangle ahead and barred his way!

"I guess that's the end!" he told the quiet girl in his arms.

But there came no answer. She had fainted.

The trip back into the depths of the swamp was a long, gruesome nightmare for Huntley. What had happened to Doris he didn't know. She had been snatched from his grasp and carried away. As for himself, he was borne along anything but gently by one of the ugly beasts, while others hemmed him in, front and rear.

On they went through the night, that weird procession.

Dawn was breaking, when at length they regained the interior knoll, and there a great tribal assemblage of the monsters seemed to be in progress.

As his captors came up, a rasping murmur ran through the conclave. A surge of relief ran through Huntley, for there was Doris, unharmed, but clasped in the clam-shell-like plant which had carried her. The sun was glinting on her dark hair.

She looked pale, but her eyes flashed Huntley a reassuring smile.

"You're all right?" he called, as the beast that had borne him there now set him on the ground.

"Yes, all right." The plant opened its maw, let her gently down. "It's you I'm worrying about. These fiends are getting ready to hold some sort of tribunal. They blame you for our attempted escape, I think. You know—the queen can do no wrong! They think you carried me off. I'll see they don't harm you."

"I only hope you're right, that it's I whom they blame," he replied.

The tribunal now got under way, making further conversation inadvisable.

While the beast plants formed in a solemn circle, two of their leaders remained with Huntley and Doris in the center of the ring.

These seemed to be presenting the two sides of the case; and it was obvious from the first, by the rustlings and raspings that greeted their gestures that the assemblage was divided in its opinion.

AT LENGTH, what seemed like a vote was taken. A majority left the circle, moved away to one side—whereupon the leader who appeared to represent them seized Huntley, held him poised, ready to fling him into their clamoring midst.

He saw the spikes on the ends of their hideous traps quiver in anticipation, saw them peer at him avidly through their yawning buds. He gave himself up for lost.

But just as the monster was about to hurl him to that appalling doom, Doris rushed up with a scream. Slipping Neil's sheath-knife from its scabbard on his belt, she turned to the assemblage and pressed it against her breast.

It was obvious to Huntley, and seemingly to all of them, what she meant to do. She would plunge that deadly blade into her heart, sacrificing herself rather than see him die so hideously.

Recognizing this, the beast that held Neil let him go.

"Doris!" he cried, rushing up to her, snatching the knife away. "You—you can't do that for me!"

"Why not?" she defied him, reaching for it again. "What different does it make? What does life mean to me if—"

Then she paused, flushed crimson.

But Huntley had heard enough. Seizing her by her slender shoulders, he swung her around, forced her to look into his eyes.

"You—you mean—you love me? Tell me, Doris."

She said nothing, but her lips trembled.

"Oh, my dearest—my darling!"

Only a moment they clung together, for presently a vast rustling and rasping reached their ears. Releasing the girl, Huntley wheeled to face that sinister throng.

Then they both realized something—something strange, miraculous. The tones of the vibrations were different from anything they had heard in the past.

The monsters were pleased with this

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evidence of love their queen had bestowed upon the stranger.

The two factors reunited, formed about them in a weird moving circle—bowing, almost dancing.

"Oh, my dear!" said Doris, half sobbing, half laughing, as she thrust his knife back in its sheath. "I believe they're accepting you as consort to the queen. Hail, King Neil!"

They were soon to see how true this was.

With exuberant ritual, with extravagant bowing and gesticulating, the monsters escorted them to the royal palace.

Then, when they were safely inside, began an eerie ceremonial procession. Around and around the building they paraded. The parade grew into a dance, the dance into a dervish riot.

"Darling!" she murmured, clinging to him. "Did you ever see anything so perfectly astounding? I'd like to laugh, if only it weren't so serious."

"So would I," he agreed, pressing her soft cheek against his. "It's a moment's bliss in this inferno."

But they well knew the situation held an undercurrent far too ominous to be taken lightly. They stood there gravely, after the first surprise and relief, watching anxiously the bizarre homage of these strange subjects.

All morning the wild celebration continued, growing in tempo with evidences of their devotion—fruits, birds, small animals.

By afternoon the ovation had developed into an orgy.

"Somewhere these monsters are finding some stimulation, something with the effect of liquor," declared Neil thoughtfully at last.

"I don't know what it could be," said Doris, "unless—"

She checked herself, paled; and the terrible thought ran through his mind too.

Presently came ghastly proof, for now the joy-maddened beasts began bringing more terrible offerings still. Human bodies—the bodies of farmers outside the swamp, of townspeople from the near-by villages—they brought and laid on the porch.

When at last the harrowing day was over, and the surfeited, exhausted creatures had withdrawn, their "rulers" set about the horrible task of removing that tribute.

Then they sat down and tried to consider what their next step should be. Of course, they might make another attempt at escape, but to be captured in a second attempt would surely mean death for them both.

They must figure some way to combat these monsters, for the safety of mankind.

But how? That was the question. Poison? They had none, nor any facilities for making it in sufficient quantities, even if they knew what ingredients to use and could find them. Fire, then? There was little chance of igniting that dank swamp, even if they themselves were willing to risk death in the resultant conflagration. As for slaying the beasts hand to hand—

Late they sat up that night, futilely considering the problem.

At length Doris showed Huntley to the

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room her father had formerly occupied—and they bade each other a fond good night, knowing it might be their last.

IN THE morning Huntley had an idea. It was nebulous, and he told her before explaining not to put too much faith in it, though he thought it was worth a trial.

"Every plant, as you know, has some natural enemy," he began, "some mold or other fungus—some rust or blight or mildew that under favorable conditions will destroy it."

"But if these beasts had such a thing, wouldn't it have shown some evidence by now?" she asked.

"They haven't," he explained. "That's just the point. No new species has these parasites at first. It takes time to develop them. But neither have they the resistance to fight them, if any should be encountered, for no immunity has been developed either."

"But where can you find such an enemy?"

"On the native *Dionœa* with which your father started, I hope. Those little plants must have some mold or fungus of some sort on them—something against which they have developed a resistance, but that might be made fatal to this new giant species."

Cautiously, watchfully, with a great air of innocence, Huntley ventured out into the swamp after breakfast. Unmolested by the beast plants, since he did not go far, he succeeded in finding several specimens of the innocent-looking little Venus's flytrap. Their guardians watched him, but made no hostile move.

These little plants he uprooted and brought back to the laboratory. While Doris stood by excitedly, he examined portions of their leaves and stems through her father's compound microscope.

"Ah, here's something that looks promising!" he exclaimed. "Take a peep."

She looked—to see an irregular, island-shaped mass of protoplasm, without separating cell walls but containing several dark nuclei.

"A plasmodium," Huntley explained, when Doris had turned from the microscope and lifted a questioning face. "The formation is characteristic of the slime molds. Curious little devils—half plants, half animals. Very clannish, they are. Like to stick together. You've seen colonies of some of the larger species on rotten logs and decaying leaves."

"Ugh—yes!" with a shudder. "Slimy, yellowish or brownish things!"

"Exactly. Mere spreading masses of naked protoplasm. And unlike the fungi, which are true plants, these voracious creatures engulf the tissues of whatever they attack, devouring their victims with the rapacity of animals."

"How horrible!"

"But just the sort of enemy we want—our ally, working for victory against the beast plants. But everything depends upon whether I can develop plasmodia of sufficient size and virulence to do the trick. I must study your father's notes, experiment with his solutions."

FOR the next week, that little laboratory in the depths of the great Okefenokee Swamp was the scene of feverish activity. And gradually, as Huntley's plasmodia of repulsive slime molds developed, it became a scene of horror, too.

He felt sure he did not need to change their characteristics; simply their size and quantity, and let their natural voracity do the rest.

Huge liverish-looking things, they grew on cultures under bell-jars till they oozed out on all sides—when he would transfer them to boxes and let them continue their nauseous growth, feeding them, stimulating them with those same mysterious solutions Professor Mortimer had used with such terrible results.

Meantime, while Huntley worked in the laboratory almost night and day, with Doris's assistance, the outside swamp became another scene of horror. For now the buds of the beast plants broke into clusters of great white flowers, and the mating season began.

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A deathly fragrance, mingled with clouds of stifling pollen, filled the air. The orgy that had marked the "wedding" ceremony in honor of their king and queen was as nothing to the incessant carousal that now went on, with its demonaic clashes between the lust-maddened beasts.

But there was a graver aspect than this to the situation, for the two workers in the laboratory knew that once the mating season was over, those monsters would develop seeds by the billions and trillions. And that if those seeds once fell, next spring the swamp would be too small for the myriads of the new generation. The following summer would see them overrun the country, the continent!

In short, whatever was to be done must be done before many more days had passed, if an unparalleled catastrophe was to be averted.

So, it was under such pressure that Huntley and Doris worked—and as they worked there developed a graver aspect still. The frenzied monsters, resentful that their sovereigns did not come out and preside over their orgiastic festivals, surrounded the shack and urged them forth with violent rustlings and raspings.

These demands became more and more insistent with each passing day, more and more of the maddened beasts joining in the demonstration. Growing bolder, less respectful of majesty they came closer, peering ever more curiously, more intently through the windows.

Was it merely because they wondered why their rulers wouldn't come out—or did their incalculable, unnatural intelligence suspect what was going on inside?

At any rate, Neil and Doris had long since concluded that to go out, with the beasts in the frenzy, would be to court death or worse. So they stayed inside, worked with desperate haste on those grim cultures.

One night, well toward dawn, Huntley was awakened by a peculiar sound—as of something trying to break into the shack.

Sitting bolt upright in bed, he listened. The sound seemed to come from the laboratory. Hastily he made his way there, groping through the dark.

On his arrival he saw a sight that chilled him. One of the monsters had broken a window with its trap-jaws and was swishing its floriate head about, inside.

That much he saw by the pale starlight, when the beast suddenly saw him.

What happened next happened with lightning speed. The ominous monster, infuriated no doubt by being discovered, thrust in one of those mighty claws and lunged for him. Dodging, he dashed for the door—but the claw reached there, cut him off. So Huntley backed against the far wall, thinking desperately fast, and the spiked jaws of the deadly trap swung nearer, nearer.

With providential inspiration he seized one of those loathsome bell-jars from a near-by shelf and hurled it full into that yawning maw.

The jaws came shut with a rasp that sent a shudder up his spine. The beast withdrew the murderous tentacle, thrashed its head in fury. But before it could thrust another tentacle in, Huntley had gained the door, escaped.

Doris was standing there in the hall, trembling, a kimono wrapped around her.

"What was it?" she asked.

He told her, adding grimly: "I don't think he'll like that meal any too well! It forced my hand, but—well, we'll be likely to know now, before long, if the thing will work."

And he was right.

For next morning a peculiar stamping, crashing sound came to their ears; and looking out, they saw one of the beasts beating about the knoll in a rage, masses of liverish plasmodia clinging to him like leeches, and growing visibly as they stared.

"Our intruder of last night!" said Huntley with a shudder.

"How horrible!" Doris echoed.

"Yes, but it's our lives or theirs—and our lives and no knowing how many thousands of other human lives! Thank Heaven, we know now the plasmodia are their equals. A few more days and we'll be ready for them."

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THEY were not given those few more days, however, for the pain-maddened monstrosity withdrew even as they watched him—to return presently with a score or more of his companions.

A moment or two the ugly chimeras paused on the knoll, while the afflicted one issued a few swift, rasping commands. Then they surged down with him toward the "royal palace" of their now hated rulers.

"Quick, the hall!" cried Huntley, realizing that was the one place those murderous claws could not reach.

They gained it, stood there tense, as the wrathful beasts reached the shack.

A crash of breaking windows followed. The building swayed, its timbers groaned, as the attacking monsters struggled to force their tentacles in. Their bodies were fortunately too large to get inside by any of the existing openings, unless they made new ones.

"Oh, we must do something!" exclaimed Doris, paling. "They'll tear the place apart."

"I'll try," he encouraged, pressing her hand. "Wait here."

Rushing to the end of the hall, he waited his chance, then dashed into the laboratory, seized the bell-jar of those deadly plasmodia, hurled it through a window at one of the beasts.

Again and again, risking death each time one of the beasts was infected, in turn infecting those around it in its efforts to fling off the swift-stinging, gnawing stuff that devoured the beast-plant and grew with every horrid gulp.

The first charge broke as the dismayed monsters retreated, lashing helplessly at this strange enemy that bit into them like acid.

But swiftly they rallied, reenforced their ranks, charged again—more and yet more of them.

Grim, desperate, panting for breath, Huntley met each charge with boxes and bell-jars of the deadly slime molds—and so, for hours, he held off the attacking horde.

As the day wore on, however, it became evident that the besieged pair could not hold out much longer. Although more and more of the beasts were beginning to rasp with the pain of those leech-like parasites, it served only to infuriate them, and in their rage they were literally demolishing the shack, smashing their jaws in the process, but splintering timber after timber.

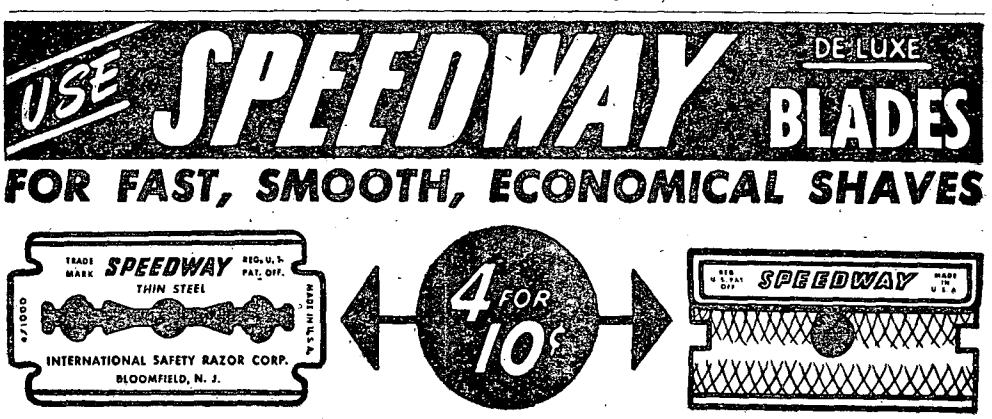
Worst of all, as the afternoon waned, the supply of plasmodia began to run out—a situation Huntley kept from Doris as long as he could. But finally, as the monsters were massing for a new attack, he was forced to tell her.

"Then you mean—"

She paled, unable to complete the thought in words.

"I mean, I'm afraid it's the end." He took her in his arms as he spoke, "but, darling, at least we will face them together. At least, I found you—alive."

"And oh, my dear, my dear—we found love. They can't take that from us."



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They clung together, waiting for the loathsome attack they were powerless to resist. He held his sheath-knife ready, to fight while he could, and then to save themselves from a worse fate.

But as the minutes passed and the rasping, frenzied beasts failed to attack they began to wonder, began to hope anew.

Finally, releasing her, Huntley crept cautiously down the hall, stepped into the shattered laboratory. One glance outside, and he signalled her to follow.

"Why, they're going away!" she cried, almost unable to believe her eyes.

It was true. The writhing monsters had evidently had enough for the day, were withdrawing into the sallow dusk of the swamp.

"It must be their natural plant reaction to darkness," Huntley explained grimly. "They evidently aren't keen on night fighting. And unless I miss my guess, they won't be very keen on fighting tomorrow, either!"

HIS prediction was fully borne out. By sun-up next day a mighty stamping, crashing sound swelled through the woods, far louder than the noise that had continued all night. Leaving the hall, where they had sat sleepless and ready for the end while Doris dozed fitfully, Huntley went to a window, peered through it.

Rustling and rattling in agony scores of the maddened beasts were thrashing about the knoll, covered with great red blobs of the ravenous plasmodia. Sickened, Huntley turned away.

The man and girl remained in the battered shack quite unmolested all the day —all the night. By the next dawn the swamp was one vast throb of weakened anguish, slowly subsiding, fading off by sunset to ominous silence.

The third morning of that horrible period not a sound disturbed the brooding hush that had settled there. Thankfully, prayerfully, they looked into each other's eyes. Then they dubiously left that narrow hall that had been their refuge—left the ruined shack to venture outside with the utmost caution.

But there was no need for caution. Everywhere were grim evidences of how thoroughly the slime molds had done their work. The menace was over. The beast-plants had been wiped out.

It was evident, too, that their plasmodia destroyers were doomed. Some were already disintegrating. Others dragged themselves slowly, despairingly along the ground, starving, in a vain search for more of the one species on which they could feed—a species never to exist again.

Doris shuddered. Then, lifting her grave face, she murmured: "Somehow, I knew you'd be successful, Neil dear!"

He replied, his own face grave: "How could I have failed, when you had such faith in me?"

Clasping each other's hands, they fled from that loathsome swamp.

Star-Facts

TO THINK that we dwell on a star
And poise in the infinite sky
While all about us, afar,
Systems and sun-drifts ply!

That we balance aloft in space,
Like an irised bubble in air,
Where comets flash and race
With thunder in their hair!

—Harry Kemp

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The Conquest of the Moon Pool

By A. MERRITT

Conclusion

CHAPTER XXXIV

IN THE BEGINNING

LARRY and I followed Lakla into the chamber. It was her own boudoir, if I may so call it. Smaller than any of the other chambers of the domed castle in which we had been, its intimacy was revealed not only by its faint fragrance but by its high mirrors of polished silver and various oddly wrought articles of the feminine toilet that lay here and there; things I afterward knew to be the work of the artisans of the Akka—and no mean metal workers were they.

One of the window slits dropped almost to the floor, and at its base was a wide, comfortably cushioned seat commanding a view of the bridge and of the cavern ledge. To it the handmaiden beckoned us; sank upon it, drew Larry down beside her and, smiling witchingly, motioned me to sit close to him.

"Now this," she said, "is what the Silent Ones have commanded me to tell you two: To you, Larry, that knowing, you may weigh all things in your mind and answer as your spirit bids you a question that the Three will ask. And what that is I know not," she murmured. "And I, they say, must answer, too—and it—frightens me!"

The great golden eyes widened; darkened with dread. She sighed, shook her head impatiently; leaned over toward me.

"And to you, Goodwin," she went on, "that you may understand; and understanding carry to your own world, if so it be that you attain it, a new wisdom and a warning. And be not afraid, they say, to speak, for what they utter through me is truth. Truth more eternal than that sun of yours which I so long to see, and may, perhaps, never behold—" She paused wistfully.

"Not like us, and never like us," she spoke low, wonderingly, "the Silent Ones say were they. Nor were those from which they sprang like those from which we have come. Although like these last they were born, lived and died; and like us now they live and die. But they pass only when they will it! Ancient, ancient beyond thought are the Taithu, the race of the Silent Ones. Far, far below this place where now we sit, close to earth heart itself were they born. And there they dwelt for time upon time, *laya* upon *laya* upon *laya*, with others, not like them; some of which have vanished time upon time agone, others that still dwell in their—cradle.

"It is hard"—she hesitated—"hard to tell this, that slips through my mind because I know so little that even as the Three told it to me; it passed from me for lack of place to stand upon," she went on, quaintly. "Something there was of time when earth and sun were but cold mists

Lakla reveals to Larry and Dr. Goodwin the ancient secret of the mysterious Moon Pool. The two take new courage in their task of reaching the Lost Ones, and escaping the evil menace of the Shining One

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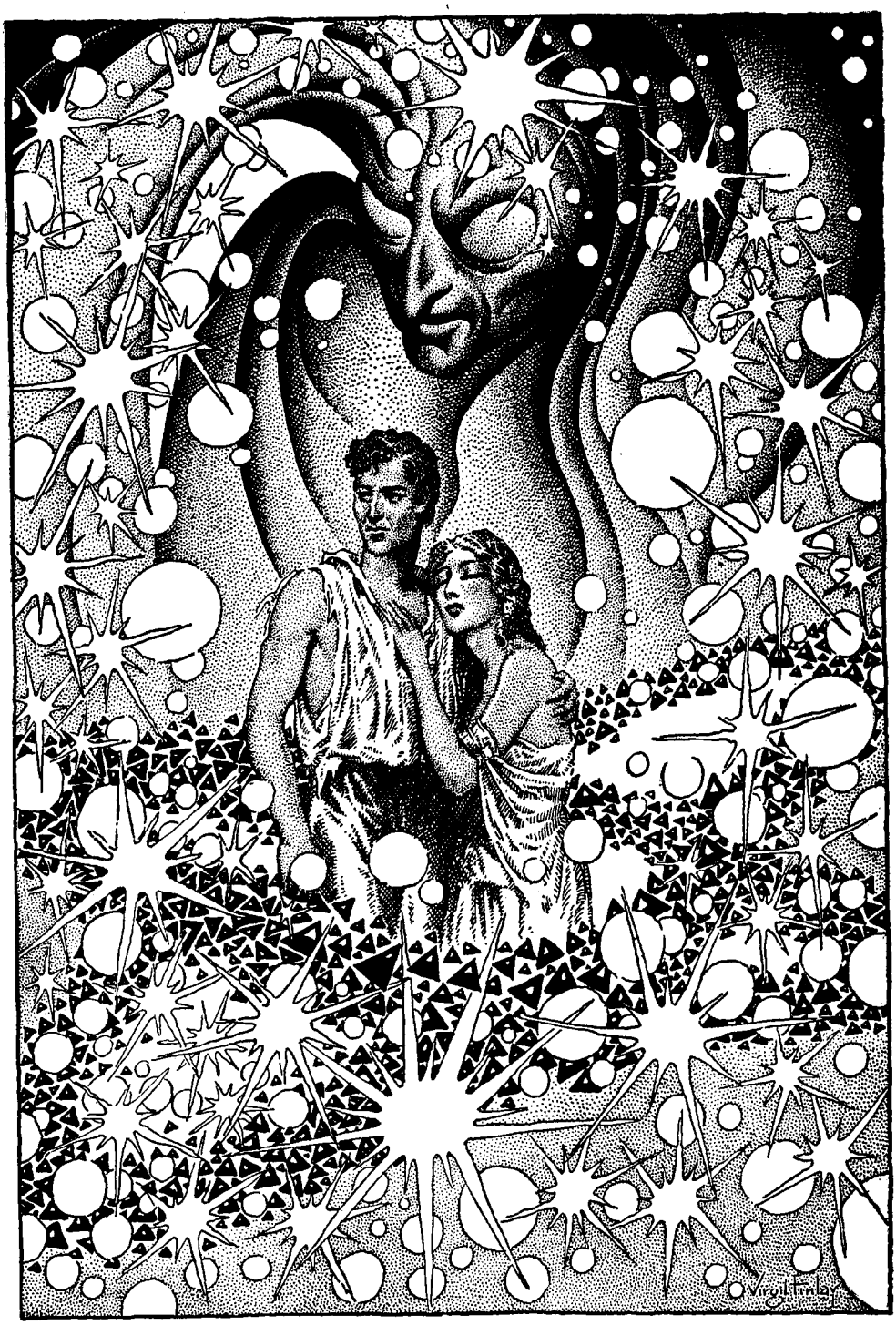

They stood bravely waiting as the radiance grew brighter and the dread Dweller swept closer. . . .

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in the—the heavens. Something of these mists drawing together, whirling, whirling, faster and faster. Drawing as they whirled more and more of the mists—growing larger, growing warm—forming at last into the globes they are, with others spinning around the sun.

"Something, too, of regions within this globe where vast fire was prisoned, and bursting forth tore and rent the young orb. Of one such bursting forth that sent what you call moon flying out to company us and left behind those spaces whence we now dwell—and of—of life particles that here and there below grew into the race of the Silent Ones, and those others. But not the Akka which, like you, they say came from above. And all this I do not understand. Do you, Goodwin?" she appealed to me.

I nodded—for what she had related so fragmentarily was in reality an excellent approach to the theory of a coalescing nebula contracting into the sun and its planets. And of the hurling out of the moon in a cataclysm of earth.

Here, too, was something of the theory of life starting on earth through the dropping upon portions favorable to their development of similar minute, life *spores*, propelled through space by the driving power of light and developing through the vast ages into man and every other living thing we know.

Nor was it incredible that in the ancient nebula that was the matrix of our solar system similar, or rather dissimilar particles in all but the subtle essence we call life, might have become entangled and, resisting every cataclysm as they had resisted the absolute zero of outer space, found in these caverned spaces their proper environment. Here they may have developed into the race of the Silent Ones and —only *they* could tell what else!

"I understand," I replied, "and although it is all very—marvelous—still, I believe."

The hand maiden's voice was now surer. "They say that in their cradle near earth heart they grew; grew untroubled by the turmoil and disorder which flayed the surface of this globe, although then they knew not that there was aught beside the place in which they dwelt. And they say it was a place of light and that strength came to them from earth heart—strength greater than you and those from which you sprang ever derived from sun.

"At last, ancient, ancient beyond all thought they say again, was this time when they began to know, to realize themselves. And wisdom came ever more swiftly. Up from their cradle, because they did not wish to dwell longer with those others, they came and found this place.

"When all the face of earth was covered with waters in which lived only tiny, hungry things that knew naught save hungers and its satisfaction, *they* had attained the wisdom that enabled them to make paths such as we have just traveled and to look out upon those waters! And *laya* upon *laya* therafter, time upon time, they went upon the paths and watched the flood recede; saw great bare flats of steaming ooze appear on which crawled and splashed larger things which had grown from the tiny hungry ones; watched the flats rise higher and higher and green life begin to clothe them; saw mountains uplift and vanish.

"EVER the green life waxed and the things which crept and crawled grew greater and took over different forms; until at last came a time when the steaming mists lightened and the things which had begun as little more than tiny hungry mouths were huge and monstrous, so huge that the tallest of my Akka would not have reached the knee of the smallest of them.

"But in none of these was there realization of themselves, say the Three. Naught but hunger driving, always driving them to still its crying.

"So for time upon time the race of the Silent Ones took the paths no more, placing aside the half-thought that they had of making their way to earth face even as they had made their way from beside earth heart. They turned wholly to the

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seeking of wisdom, and after other time on time they attained that which killed even the faintest shadow of the half-thought.

For they crept far within the mysteries of life and death; they mastered the illusion of space; they lifted the veils of creation and of its twin, destruction. And they stripped the covering from the flaming jewel of truth. But when they had crept within those mysteries, they bid me tell you, Goodwin, they found ever other mysteries veiling the way. And after they had uncovered the jewel of truth, they found it to be a gem of infinite facets and therefore not wholly to be read before eternity's unthinkable end.

"And for this they were glad, because now throughout eternity might they and theirs pursue knowledge over ways illimitable.

"They conquered light—light that sprang at their bidding from the nothingness that gives birth to all things and in which all things that are, have been and shall be, lie. Light that streamed through their bodies cleansing them of all dross; light that was food and drink; light that carried their vision afar or bore to them images out of space opening many windows through which they gazed down upon life, on thousands upon thousands of the rushing worlds; light that was the flame of life itself and in which they bathed, ever renewing their own. They set radiant lamps within the stones and of black light they wove the sheltering shadows and the shadows that slay.

"Arose from this people those Three, the Silent Ones. They led them all in wisdom so that in the Three grew—pride. And the Three built them this place in which we sit and set the Portal in its place and withdrew from their kind to go alone into the mysteries and to map alone the facets of truth jewel.

"Then there came here the ancestors of the Akka; tribes of them, not as they are now, and glowing but faintly within them the spark of—self-realization. And the Taithu seeing this, did not slay them. But they took the ancient, long untrodden paths and looked forth once more upon earth face. Now on the land were vast forests and a chaos of green life. On the shores things scaled and fanged, fought and devoured each other and in the green life moved bodies great and small that slew, and ran from those that would slay.

"They searched for the passage through which the Akka had come, and closed it. Then the Three took them and brought them here; and taught them and blew upon the spark until it burned ever stronger and stronger and in time they became much as they are now—my Akka.

"The Three took council after this and said, 'We have strengened spirit in these until it has become articulate; shall we not *create* spirit?' " Again she hesitated, her eyes rapt, dreaming; her gaze once more that of the pythoness through whom Apollo is whispering. "The Three are speaking," she murmured. "They have my tongue—"

And certainly, with an ease and rapidity as though she were but a voice through which minds far more facile, more powerful, poured their thoughts, she spoke. At the change of person in her phrases I felt a faint, an uncanny crepitation. Larry started, stretched out a hand toward her lips; I drew it back quickly. Anxiety written plain on his face, he restrained himself.

In some vague way I felt that she was speaking now our own tongue, so fluent was she, so clean cut the images from her words, so clear the abstractions not possible in her own speech, and borne in upon my understanding with no slightest labor of translation; the thought impinging upon consciousness and being absorbed by it—*liquidly*. Still I knew it was not our speech; could not be; rather was it our *thought*.

"YES," she said, the golden voice vibrant, "the sin of pride was ours, and pride and wisdom such as ours are perilous, comrade, ye who are named Goodwin, and who also in your way pursue

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knowledge. We said that the spirit we would create should be of the spirit of life itself, speaking to us with the tongues of the far-flung stars, of the winds, of the wide waters and of all upon and within these.

"Upon that universal matrix of matter, that mother of all things that you name the ether, we labored. Think not that her wondrous fertility is limited by what ye see on earth or what has been on earth from its beginning. Infinite, infinite are the forms the mother bears and countless are the energies that are part of her.'

"By our wisdom we had fashioned many windows out of our abode and through them we stared into the faces of myriads of words.

"We have looked upon the strange blossoming orbs that circle the sun ye call Arcturus, the crystal-clear globes that girdle Betelgeuse, the fantom spheres that diadem Aldebaran, the worlds of cool misty flame that swim within that ye name the Pleiades, and upon others, countless, countless others and upon them all were the children of ether even as they themselves were her children.

"Watching we learned, and learning we formed that ye term the Dweller, that those without name—the Shining One. Within the Universal Mother we shaped it, to be a voice to tell us her secrets. A thing of glory to go before us lighting the mysteries, a guide and an interpreter. Out of the ether we fashioned it, giving it the soul of light that still ye know not nor perhaps ever may know, and with the essence of life that ye saw blossoming deep in the abyss and that is the pulse of earth heart we filled it. And we wrought with pain and with love, with yearning and with fierce, scorching pride and from our travail came the Shining One—our child!

"There is an energy beyond and above ether, a purposeful, sentient force that laps like an ocean the furthest-flung star, that transfuses all that ether bears, that sees and speaks and feels in us and in you, that is incorporate in beast and bird and reptile, in tree and grass and all living things, that sleeps in rock and stone, that finds sparkling tongue in jewel and star and in all dwellers within the firmament. And this is what ye call consciousness!

"Your forefathers knew this when they worshiped spirits of wood and stream, of wave and torrent and mountain, of fire and air.

"For their eyes were younger and they saw clearer, and what to them appeared these spirits were pools and billows and wavelets of the ocean of consciousness moving within all these things. And in that sea rests all experience, all knowledge that has been and is of things created from birth of eternity.

"We crowned the Shining One with the seven orbs of light which are the channels between it and the sentient flood we sought to make articulate, the portals through which flow its currents and so flowing, become choate, vocal, self-realizant within our child.

"But as we shaped, there passed some of the essences of our pride. In giving will we had given power, perforce, to exercise that will for good or for evil, to speak or to be silent, to tell us what we wished of that which poured into it through the seven orbs or to withhold that knowledge itself.

"And in forging it from the immortal energies, we had endowed it with their indifference. Open to all consciousness it held within it the pole of utter joy and the pole of utter woe with all the arc that lies between; all the ecstasies of the countless worlds and suns and all their sorrows. All that ye symbolize as gods and all ye symbolize as devils—not negativing each other, for there is no such thing as negation, but holding them together, balancing them, incompassing them, pole upon pole!"

So *this* was the explanation of the entwined emotions of joy and terror that had changed so appallingly Throckmartin's face and the faces of all the Dweller's slaves!

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CHAPTER XXXV

THE EPIC OF A LOST WORLD

THE handmaiden's eyes grew bright, alert, again. The brooding passed from her face; the golden voice that had been so deep sought its own familiar pitch.

"I listened while the Three spoke to you," she said. "Now that shaping of the Shining One had been a long, long travail and time had flown over the world without, *laya* upon *laya*. For a space the Shining One was content to dwell here; to be fed with the foods of light; to open the eyes of the Three to mystery upon mystery and to read for them facet after facet of the gem of truth.

"Yet as the tides of consciousness flowed through it, they left behind shadowings and echoes of their burdens; and the Shining One grew stronger, always stronger *of itself within itself*. Its will strengthened and now not always was it the will of the Three; and the pride that was woven in the making of it waxed, while the love for them that its creators had set within it waned.

"Not ignorant were the Taithu of the work of the Three. First there were a few, then more and more who coveted the Shining One and who would have had the Three share with them the knowledge it drew in for them. But the Three, in their pride, would not.

"There came a time when its will was now *all* its own, and it rebelled, turning its gaze to the wider spaces beyond the Portal, offering itself to the many there who would serve it; tiring of the Three, their control and their abode.

"Now the Shining One has its limitations, even as we. Over water it can pass, through air and through fire; but pass it cannot through rock or metal. So it sent a message—how I know not—to the Taithu who desired it, whispering to them the secret of the Portal. And when the time was ripe they opened the Portal and the Shining One passed through it to them; nor would it return to the Three though they commanded, and when they would have forced it they found that it had hived and hidden a knowledge that they could not overcome.

"Yet by their arts the Three could have shattered the seven shining orbs and stilled its life, sending it back to that from which they had drawn it; but they would not because—they loved it!

"Those to whom it had gone built for it that place I have just shown you, and they bowed to it and drew wisdom from it. But ever they turned more and more from the ways in which the Taithu had walked, for it seemed that which came to the Shining One through the seven orbs had less and less of good and more and more of the power you call evil. Knowledge it gave and understanding, yes; but not that which, clear and serene, lights the paths of right wisdom. Rather were they flares pointing the dark roads that lead to—to the ultimate evil!

"Not all of the race of the Three followed the counsel of the Shining One. There were many, many, who would have none of it nor of its power and who saw clearly the peril threatening. So were the Taithu split; and in this place where there had been none, came hatred, fear and suspicion. Those who pursued the ancient ways went to the Three and pleaded with them to destroy their work—and they would not, for still they loved it; sitting lonely, mourning in their place like those from whom a best beloved has run.

"Stronger grew the Dweller's pride, darker its power and less and less did it lay before its worshipers—for now so they had become—the fruits of its knowledge. And it grew restless, turning its gaze upon earth face even as it had turned it from the Three. It whispered to the Taithu to take again the paths and look out upon the world. Lo! above them was no longer sea but a great fertile land on which dwelt an unfamiliar race, skilled in arts, seeking and finding wisdom—mankind! Mighty builders they were; vast were their cities and huge their temples of stone.

"They called their lands Muria and

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they worshiped a god Thanaroa whom they imagined to be the maker of all things, dwelling far away, careless, indifferent, as to the fate of his creations. They worshiped as closer gods, not indifferent but to be prayed to and to be propitiated, the moon and the sun. Two kings they had each with his council and his court. One was high priest to the moon and the other high priest to the sun.

"The mass of this people were black-haired, but the sun king and his nobles were ruddy with hair like mine; and the moon king and his followers were like Yolara—or Lugur. And this, the Three say, Goodwin, came about because for time upon time the law had been that whenever a ruddy-haired or ashen-tressed child was born of the black-haired it became dedicated at once to either sun god or moon god, later wedding and bearing children only to their own kind. Until at last from the blackhaired came no more of the light-locked ones, but the ruddy ones, being stronger, still arose from them."

She paused, running her long fingers through her own bronze-flecked ringlets. Selective breeding this with a vengeance, I thought.

"Above, far, far above the abode of the Shining One," she went on, "was their greatest temple, holding the shrines both of sun and moon. All about it were other temples hidden behind mighty walls, each enclosing its own space and squared and ruled and standing within a shallow lake; the sacred city, the city of the gods of this land."

It is the Nan-Matal that she is describing, I thought.

"OUT upon all this looked the Taithu who were now but the servants of the Shining One as it had been the messenger of the Three," Lakla said. "When they returned the Shining One spoke to them, promising them dominion over all that they had seen, yea, *under It* dominion of all earth itself and later perhaps of other earths. With all of mankind their slaves!

"In the Shining One had grown craft, cunning; knowledge to gain that which it desired. Therefore it told its Taithu—and mayhap told them truth—that not yet was it time for *them* to go forth. That slowly must they pass into that outer world for they had sprung from heart of earth and that even it, the Shining One itself, lacked power to swirl unaided into and through the above. Then it counseled them, instructing them what to do. They hollowed the chamber wherein I first saw you, cutting their way to it that path down which from it you sped.

"It revealed to them that the force that is within moon flame is kin to the force that is within the moon. For the chamber of its birth was the chamber, too, of moon birth and into it went the subtle essences and powers that flow in that earth child. And it taught them how to make that which fills what you call the Moon Pool whose opening is close behind its veil hanging upon the gleaming cliffs.

"When this was done it taught them how to make and how to place the seven lights through which moon flame streams into Moon Pool—the seven lights that are kin to its own seven orbs even as its fires are kin to moon fires—and which would open for it a path that it could tread. And all this the Taithu did, working so secretly that neither those of their race whose faces were set against the Shining One nor the busy men above knew aught of it.

"When it was done they moved up the path, clustering within the Moon Pool Chamber. Moon flame streamed through the seven globes, poured down upon the pool; they saw mists arise, embrace and become one with the moon flame. And then up through Moon Pool, drawn by the seven torrents, shaping itself within the mists of light, whirling, radiant—the Shining One!

"Almost free, almost loosed upon the world it coveted!

"Again it counseled them, and they pierced the passage whose portal you found first; set the fires within its stones that they might breathe of their light, and re-

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vealing themselves to the moon king and his priests spake to them even as the Shining One had instructed.

"Now was the moon king filled with fear and amaze when he looked upon the Taithu, shrouded with protecting mists of light in Moon Pool Chamber, and heard their words. Yet, being crafty, he thought of the power that would be his if he heeded and how quickly the strength of the sun king would dwindle. So he and his made a pact with the Shining One's messengers.

"When next the moon was round and poured its flames down upon Moon Pool, Taithu gathered there again, watched the child of the Three take shape within the pillars, speed away—and out! They heard a mighty shouting, a tumult of terror, of awe and of worship; a silence; a vast sighing. And they waited, wrapped in their mists of light, for they feared to follow nor were they near the paths that would have enabled them to look without.

"Another tumult—and back came the Shining One, murmuring with joy, pulsing, triumphant and clasped within its vapors a man and woman, ruddy-haired, golden-eyed, in whose faces rapture and horror lay side by side—gloriously, hideously. And still holding them it danced above the Moon Pool and—sank!

"Now must I be brief. *Lat* after *lat* that Shining One went forth, returning with its sacrifices. And stronger after each it grew, and gayer and more cruel. Ever when it passed with its prey toward the pool, the Taithu who watched felt a swift, strong intoxication, a drunkenness of spirit, streaming from it to them. And the Shining One forgot what it had promised them of dominion—and in this new evil delight they, too, forgot. And by this, more and more, they became its slaves, even as it had planned.

"Athirst for this poison the Shining One distilled from the flame of life within those it embraced, they built for it the great temple opposite the Veil where you watched it dance. Then here, by compact with the moon king, they carried throng upon throng of the black-haired, set them in the places beyond the green roadway and drew from them the brides and bridegrooms of that which had become their god; rejoicing in the soul drunkenness with which it flooded them when the Shining One took the offerings. Further, their god counseled them, so that the Taithu who would have washed away their evil could not prevail.

"The outer land was torn with hatred and open strife. The moon king and his kind, through the guidance of the evil Taithu and the favor of the Shining One, had become powerful and the sun king and his were darkened. And the moon priests preached that the child of the Three was the moon god itself come to dwell with them. Many believed, saying:

" 'They can show us a god, but the sun king can show none. Further when he appears he warms our spirits with a fire that makes us even as gods. And does not the moon pass before the sun in the heavens and shadow him? Nor can the sun forbid it. Therefore shall we worship the moon god!'

"Yet were there many who hated the moon king and the ways of the Dwellers. Battles there were and the whole land sickened. It was at this time that the evil Taithu set in place the pale stone whose keys are the moon rays and which you opened. They set it there that all who doubted might see the moon summon its spirit; but more than that to guard the Moon Pool against those whose doubts could not be stilled and who might creep in seeking to destroy. For only when the moon was full, all of its silver radiance streaming upon earth, could the Shining One draw strength to pass forth. At all other times it dwelt below; the Moon Pool Chamber was free of it, and bold, determined men might well enter, close its Portal and shatter the spheres of power.

"NOW suddenly vast tides arose and when they withdrew they took with them great portions of this country. And the land itself began to sink. Then said the moon king that the moon had called

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to ocean to destroy because wroth that another than he was worshipped. The people believed and there was wide slaughter. When it was over there was no more a sun king nor any of the ruddy-haired folk; slain were they, slain down to the babe at breast.

"But still the tides swept higher; still dwindled the land!

"As it shrank multitudes of the fleeing people were led through Moon Pool Chamber and carried here. They were what now are called the *ladala,* and they were given place and set to work; and they thrived. Came, too, many of the fair-haired; and they were given dwellings. They sat beside the evil Taithu; they became drunk even as they with the dancing of the Shining One; they learned—not all, only a little part but that little enough—of their arts. And ever the Shining One danced more gaily out there within the black amphitheater; grew ever stronger. And ever the hordes of its slaves behind the Veil increased.

"Nor did the Taithu who clung to the old ways check this. They could not. By the sinking of the land above, their own spaces were imperiled. Shattered mountains crashed through, and there were quakings as though its eternal walls strove to march upon each other. All of their strength and all of their wisdom it took to keep this land from perishing; nor had they help from those others mad for the poison of the Shining One. And they had no time to deal with them nor the earth race with whom they had foregathered.

"At last came a slow, vast tide. It rolled even to the bases of the walled islets of the city of the gods, and within these now were all that were left of my people on earth face.

"I am of those people." She paused, looking at me proudly. "One of the daughters of the sun king whose seed is still alive in the *ladala!*"

As Larry opened his mouth to speak she waved a silencing hand.

"This tide did not recede," she went on. "And after a time this remnant, the moon king leading them, joined those who had already fled below. The rocks became still, the quakings ceased and now those Ancient Ones who had been laboring could take breath. And anger grew within them as they looked upon the work of their evil kin. Again they sought the Three; and the Three now knew what they had done and their pride was humbled. They would not slay the Shining One themselves, for still they loved it. But they instructed these others how to undo their work; how also they might destroy the evil Taithu were it necessary.

"Armed with the wisdom of the Three they went forth, but now the Shining One was strong indeed. They could not slay it!

"Nay, it knew and was prepared; they could not even pass beyond its veil nor seal its abode. Ah, strong, strong, mighty of will, full of craft and cunning had the Shining One become. So they turned upon their kind who had gone astray and made them perish, to the last. The Shining One came not to the aid of its servants, though they called. For within its will was the thought that they were of no further use to it; that it would rest awhile and dance with them—who had so little of the power and wisdom of its Taithu and therefore no reins upon it. And while this was happening black-haired and fair-haired ran and hid and were but shaking vessels of terror.

"The Ancient Ones took council. This was their decision; that they would go from the gardens before the Silver Waters—leaving, since they could not kill it, the Shining One with its worshipers. They sealed the mouth of the passage that leads to the Moon Pool Chamber and they changed the face of the cliff so that none might tell where it had been. But the passage itself they left open, having foreknowledge I think, of a thing that was to come to pass in the far future—perhaps it was your journey here, my Larry and Goodwin—verily I think so.

"For the last time they went to the Three, to pass sentence upon them. They

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found them broken, their wisdom dulled with sorrow. And this was the doom they put upon the Three—that here they should remain, alone, among the Akka, served by them, until that time dawned when they would have strength and will to destroy the evil they had created—and even now—loved. Nor might they seek death, nor follow their judges until this had come to pass. This was the doom they put upon the Three for the wickedness that had sprung from their pride, and they strengthened it with their arts that it might not be broken.

"Then they passed—to a far land they had chosen where the Shining One could not go, beyond the black precipices of Doul that guard the place of wonders and are in turn guarded by the winged serpents, a green land—"

"Ireland!" interrupted Larry, with conviction, "I knew it."

"Since then time upon time had passed," she went on, unheeding. "The people called this place Muria after their sunken land and soon they forgot where was the portal the Taithu had sealed. The moon king became the Voice of the Dweller and always with the Voice is a beautiful woman of the moon king's kin who is its priestess. The Shining One is kinder to his priestess than to his Voice; and so really the woman rules. Long have they dwelt here—and many have been the *ladala* who have danced—before the tiers of jet, upon the ivory dais, and passed in the Shining One's train over the Silvery Waters and through the Veil.

"And many have been the journeys upward of the Shining One, through the Moon Pool, returning with still others in its coils.

"Long has it watched the world swarm with man—and now again is it grown restless, longing for the wider spaces. It has spoken to Yolara and to Lugur even as it did to the dead Taithu, promising them dominion. And it has grown even stronger, drawing to itself power to go far on the moon stream where it wills from the Moon Pool Chamber. Thus was it able to seize your friend, Goodwin, and Olaf's wife and babe, and many more. Yolara and Lugur plan to open ways to earth face; to depart with their court and under the Shining One grasp the world!

"But now is the *va* about to strike when it will be settled whether the Shining One shall rule, or whether the Three shall destroy it!

"And this is the tale the Silent Ones bade me tell you—and it is done."

BREATHLESSLY I had listened to the stupendous epic of a long-lost world. Now I found speech to voice the question ever with me, the thing that lay as close to my heart as did the welfare of Larry. Indeed the whole object of my quest—the fate of Throckmartin and those who had passed with him into the Dweller's lair; yes, and of Olaf's wife, too.

"Lakla," I said, "the friend who drew me here and those he loved who preceded him—can we not save them?"

"I'll volunteer to go into that joint any minute and I'll bet I can get 'em," Larry's face was grim. "Lakla's been buffaloed like all the rest. Give me a hose or just make me one gas cylinder—and I'll get 'em out, don't doubt it."

He had spoken in English and the handmaiden had not understood; she paused, perplexed.

"Tell him what he wants to know, heart's delight," he spoke to her. "If you can," he added.

"The Three say no, Goodwin." There was again in her eyes the pity with which she had looked upon Olaf. "The Shining One—*feeds*—upon the flame of life itself, setting in its place its own fires and its own will. Its slaves are only shells through which it gleams. Death, say the Three, is the best that can come to them; yet will that be a boon great indeed."

"Gassed—let us get 'em away once, Doc, and we'll put up a fight to get 'em back all right," whispered O'Keefe.

"But they have souls, *mavourneen*," he said to her. "And they're alive still, in a way. Anyhow, their souls have not gone."

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"It was weeks before he passed that my friend Throckmartin was taken," I said. "How did he and his wife come together in the Dweller's lair?"

"I do not know," she answered, slowly. "You say they loved—and it is true that love is stronger even than death. By soul, Larry dear, you mean, I think that which is in us that lives forever. But I do not know. I only know that those whom the Shining One has taken live ever as you see them; fed by its own life, doing as it commands and in a measure partaking of its power. Whether their souls go far—or dwell there, being imperishable—when life fire has been eaten—I do not know."

"Lakla," I said, "this blight the Dweller puts upon what it touches—its power to eat what you call the fire of life—whence comes it?"

"From the time of the first sacrifice," she answered. "Before that its touch was clean. So, too, of the sounds that accompany it—you heard, like little bells of glass—whence they came I know not; but they were not there before the sacrifices and they, too, grow ever stronger as the Shining One—eats!"

"Can—er—Fireworks go wherever he pleases?" This was Larry. "If he can, why all that ceremony Goodwin and I watched when Olaf tried to do for him? And why the spot-light?"

"Spot-light?" she repeated, wonderingly.

"The path of radiant colors that swept over the Silvery Waters and through which the Shining One came," I interpreted.

"At the first that was necessary," she answered, "as the seven lights in the Moon Pool Chamber were, and still are, needed to open its path to the above. The Taithu made the light—but as the Child of the Three grew stronger it could pass beyond the Veil unaided, going where it willed about the land beyond the Portal. But the fair-haired clung to the forms, and as long as they gave their god all the brides and bridegrooms for whom it lusted, why should it wander?" she asked. "And then I have told you that the Shining One is cunning and has great wisdom. Perhaps it fears to affright too much those who serve it and feed it," she added.

"One thing I don't understand," Larry said, "is why a girl like you keeps coming out of the black-haired crowd; so frequently and one might say, so regularly, Lakla. Aren't there ever any redheaded boys, and if they are what becomes of them?"

"That, Larry, I cannot answer," she said, very frankly. "There was a pact of some kind; how made or by whom I know not. But for long the Murians feared the return of the Taithu and greatly they feared the Three. Even the Shining One feared those who had created it—for a time; and not even now is it eager to face them. That I know. Nor are Yolara and Lugur so sure. It may be that the Three commanded it; but how or why I know not. I only know that it is true. For here am I and from where else would I have come?"

"From Ireland," said Larry O'Keefe promptly. "And that's where you're going. For 'tis no place for a girl like you to have been brought up, Lakla. What with people like frogs, and a half god three-quarters devil, and red oceans, an' the only Irish things yourself and the Silent Ones up there, bless their hearts. It's no place for ye and by the soul of St. Patrick, it's out of it soon ye'll be gettin'!"

CHAPTER XXXVI

"THE KETH HAS POWER"

LONG had been her tale in the telling, and too long, perhaps, have I been in the repeating. But not every day are the mists rolled away to reveal undreamed secrets of earth-youth.

Rising, I found I was painfully stiff—as muscle-bound as though I had actually trudged many miles. Larry, imitating me, gave an involuntary groan.

"Oh, but I'm sorry!" mourned Lakla, leaning over us. "I have forgotten—for those new to it the way is a weary one, indeed—"

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She ran to the doorway, whistled a clear high note down the passage. Through the hangings came two of the frog-men. The monsters calmly swung one arm around our knees, lifted us up like babies, and as calmly started to walk away with us!

"Put me down! Put me down, I say!" The O'Keefe's voice was both outraged and angry. Squinting around, I saw him struggling violently to get to his feet. The *Akka* only held him tighter, booming comfortingly, peering down into his flushed face inquiringly. Larry gave up—leaned back tiredly.

"Go you, Larry and Goodwin, with Kra and Gulk," the handmaiden said, "and let them minister to you. After, sleep a little—for not soon will Rador and Olaf return. And let me feel your lips before you go, Larry darlin'!" she added naïvely.

With enthusiasm he responded. She covered his eyes caressingly with her soft little palms; pushed him away.

"Now go," said Lakla, "and rest!"

Unashamedly I lay back against the horny chest of Gulk; and with a smile noticed that Larry did not really disdain the support of Kra's shining, black-scaled arm which, slipping around his waist, half-lifted him along. The two boomed softly to us as we went, turned their staring, saucer eyes upon each other.

"You know, Doc," he called back, "these beggars aren't half bad! Anyway, they're clearly mighty fond of the *colleen*. But what I'm going to do with them when we get back to Ireland beats me—" He groaned again.

They parted a hanging, and Gulk sat me softly down beside a small walled pool, sparkling with the clear water that had heretofore been brought us in the wide basins. Then they began to undress us.

"Whatever they're going to do, we can't stop 'em, Doc!". Larry moaned.

When we were stripped we were lowered gently into the water. But not long did the Akka let us splash about the shallow basin. They lifted us out, and from jars began deftly to anoint and rub us with aromatic unguents. Almost immediately every trace of soreness and stiffness vanished. Then they rubbed us vigorously with white cloths and began to dress us again!

They led us out, into a room whose circular sides were ringed with soft divans. Still smiling, I sank at once into sleep.

HOW long I slumbered I do not know. A low and thunderous booming coming through the deep window slip, reverberated through the room and awakened me. Larry yawned; arose briskly; called over.

"I feel simply great!" he announced.

He had described my own sensations accurately, and I told him so.

"Sounds as though the bass drums of every jazz band in New York were serenading us!" he observed. Simultaneously we sprang to the window; raised ourselves; peered through.

I gasped.

We were just above the level of the bridge, and its full length was plain before us. Thousands upon thousands of the Akka were crowding upon it, and far away other hordes filled like a glittering thicket both sides of the cavern ledge's crescent strand. On black scale and orange scale the crimson light fell, picking them off in little flickering points. Yes, and upon scarlet and green and blue scale, too; for now I saw that, like the leopard frogs so familiar to us, the Akka possessed an extensive range of coloring.

And while all those who guarded the castle of the Three were uniformed in their Princeton armoring, these newcomers flaunted a bewildering variety of hues. At first I thought that Lakla had perhaps yielded to some feminine penchant for livery, but watching those nearest I saw that they were formed in squads and detachments, each under the command of one of the black and yellow batrachians. These latter, then, I presumed, had some special talent for leadership.

Within ordered lines of the Akka upon the platform from which sprang the smaller span over the abyss were Lakla, Olaf, and Rador; the handmaiden clearly acting as interpreter between them and the

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giant she had called Nak, the Frog King.

"Come on!" shouted Larry. The passages were deserted, and as we raced along the O'Keefe kept up a discomfited monologue.

"Ought to wrap me up in cotton wool! Wonder how much we've missed already? Don't think it's fair of her!"

Out of the open portal we ran; over the World Heart Bridge and straight into the group.

"Oh!" cried Lakla, "I didn't want you to wake up so soon, Larry darlin'!"

"See here, *mavourneen!*" Indignation thrilled in the Irishman's voice. "I'm not going to be done up with baby-ribbons and laid away in a cradle for safe-keeping while a fight is on; don't think it! Why didn't you call me?"

"You needed rest!" There was indomitable determination in the handmaiden's tones, the eternal maternal shining defiant from her eyes. "You were tired and hurt! You shouldn't have got up!"

"Needed the rest!" groaned Larry.

"Yes—and why did you let him arise, Goodwin?" She leveled an accusing finger at me.

"Let me! Let me!" gasped the O'Keefe. "Look here, Lakla, what do you think I am?"

"You're all I have," said that maiden firmly, "and I'm going to take care of you, Larry darlin'! Don't you ever think anything different!"

"Now, Lakla—" he began. Rador was unable to respress a chuckle. Breathing heavily, Larry glared at him. The green dwarf made an heroic effort to control his mirth; failed signally. Then the humor of the situation struck O'Keefe; he grinned, a bit feebly, it is true.

"Well, pulse of my heart, considering my delicate health and general fragility, would it hurt me, do you think, to be told what's going on?" he asked.

"Not at all, Larry!" answered the handmaiden serenely. "Yolara went through the Portal. She was very, very angry."

"She was all the devil's woman that she is!" rumbled Olaf.

"No word did she speak all the journey," said Rador, "until the Portal opened. Then said she to tell you, Larree, that both Lakla and you would pray her each to destroy either before she finished with both. If—" he hesitated—"if matters should go wrong, slay the handmaiden and yourself before Yolara can grip you!" he whispered.

O'Keefe nodded.

"Rador met the messenger," went on the Golden Girl calmly. "The *ladala* are ready to rise when Lugur and Yolara lead their hosts against us. They will strike at those left behind. And in the meantime we shall have disposed my Akka to meet Yolara's men. And on that disposal we must all take council; you, Larry, and Rador, Olaf and Goodwin and Nak, the ruler of the Akka."

"Did the messenger give any idea when Yolara expects to make her little call?" asked Larry.

"Yes," she answered. "They prepare, and we may expect them in—" She gave the equivalent of about thirty-six hours of our time.

"But, Lakla," I said, the doubt that I had long been holding finding voice, "should the Shining One come, with its slaves, are the Three strong enough to cope with it?"

There was troubled doubt in her own eyes.

"I do not know," she said at last, frankly. "You have heard their story. What they promise is that they will help. I do not know—any more than do you, Goodwin!"

I looked up at the dome beneath which I knew the dread Trinity stared forth; even down upon us. And despite the awe, the assurance, I had felt when I stood before them I, too, doubted. For I had watched the Dweller at its devilish work, and I had looked upon my own friend Throckmartin and Throckmartin's wife—a clean man and woman from my own sane and understandable world—and I had seen what the Dweller had made of these two.

Why should I not have doubted?

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"WELL," said Larry, "you and I, uncle," he turned to Rador, "and Olaf here had better decide just what part of the battle we'll lead."

"Lead!" the handmaiden was appalled. "*You* lead, Larry? Why you are to stay with Goodwin and with me—up there, where we can watch."

"Lakla," Larry's tone was stern. "The O'Keefes do not stand and watch while there's fighting goin' on."

Her eyes blazed. "My Akka will take care of this!"

O'Keefe gave it up. Helplessly, he shrugged his shoulders.

"Well," he said at last, "uncle and you, Doc and Olaf, let's get together. If I've got to sit on the bleachers, I want to watch something that we've had some hand in anyway."

Lakla nodded; spoke to Nak. We started toward the golden opening, squads of the frog-men following us soldierly and disappearing about the huge structure. Nor did we stop until we came to the handmaiden's boudoir. There we seated ourselves.

"Now," said Larry, "two things I want to know. First—how many can Yolara muster against us; second, how many of these Akka have we to meet them? Never mind the *ladala*," he added. "This war's going to be won or lost on the western front."

Answering, Rador gave as the strength of Yolara's following what would be the equivalent of a hundred thousand with us; of the frog-men, roughly, two hundred and fifty thousand.

"Good enough," answered Larry. "Two to one. And they're some fighters."

"But, Larree," this was Rador, "do not forget that the nobles will have the quaking death and other things. Also that the soldiers have fought against the Akka before and will be shielded as far as possible against their spears and clubs. Also that they will smite with their swords, and that their blades can bite through the scales of Nak's warriors."

"What about the Keth?" Larry spoke. "Didn't you tell us, uncle, that it had no effect against the cliffs of the Shining One's lair and that there were some other halters on it?"

And then I remembered. I thrust my hand into my breast pocket where I had been carrying a certain devilish little silver cone; drew it out.

"And all the advantage is not on their side," I boasted. "Something surely can be done with this."

"Where did you get that?" cried Rador.

"Yolara left it behind," said I.

Delicately the handmaiden took the cone; turned it about in her hands. Then she whistled, a low golden note. The frog-woman of the rosy wall entered. Lakla spoke to her; leaving, it was not long before she returned, one arm dissolved in vacancy. And by that I knew she was carrying one of the garments of invisibility. The webbed hand vanished; the arm appeared. Lakla stooped down to the floor and felt carefully about; then, rising, thrust a slender foot into an unseen something that eclipsed it. Withdrawing the foot she pointed the cone downward, slipped the catch.

The green ray leaped from the cone, and was as quickly shut off. But at the handmaiden's feet a shower of writhing sparks burst into sight; swam, interlaced, disappeared. Lakla thrust her foot forward again, cautiously. It did not vanish!

"Those, at least, are no protection," she sighed.

She clapped her hands; a half-dozen of the Akka parted the curtains, booming softly, looking at her with luminous, round eyes. The deep monosyllables passed between them; they bowed, went out—returning shortly with a great block of stone. They placed it at her feet; withdrew. And again she leveled the cone at it and again the green ray shot forth. It impacted upon the road, spread; the boulder began to quiver, to vibrate ever more rapidly; to shine forth; coruscate—and was gone!

"Now must we put our faith in the Three indeed," said Lakla, "for that stone

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ye saw is the stone of all here, even of the bridge, and over it the Keth has power, even as ye have seen!"

CHAPTER XXXVII

"YOUR LOVE, LIVES, AND SOULS"

BUT no more of this! No need to tell of all that passed, before the five of us and Nak walked from the castle in pursuance of plans that had ripened there. We crossed the bridge. We paced the crushed ruby floor until I gazed out, Tantaluslike, upon the elfin land of moss and flower. Ten miles it was between the cavern lip and the first green growth. Larry was for setting regiments of the Akka close behind the Portal to attack when Yolara's hosts came through. But Rador pointed out that the Murians would race over the roadway in their coria, and that as there was no place there for hiding, we would only leave a considerable number of our forces behind, useless.

The coria path ended with the astounding forests and those who would pass on to the Crimson Sea must proceed on foot or in litters to the crescent ledge. And so we decided to raise barricades along this path and behind them to garrison a certain number of the Akka, who, when the hosts of Lugur and Yolara should pass, would arise and smite them with lance and club while still others flanked them.

Across the cavern mouth we planned another barricade. At certain intervals over the span we placed marks and Lakla directed the frog-men to bring stones and set them there as barriers.

Bitterly, as we were pursuing these occupations, I wished for the little pocket camera I had carried with me through the moon door and had left, alas, with my medicine-case and other effects when we fled from our pavilion in the gardens. Instead of the sketches I had hastily made. I could have shown my scientific colleagues actual pictures of the marching files of the amphibians taking their places behind the walls as they built them; a peep at least of elfland; the prodigious bridge—

Larry, happy as a lark, busied with the plans of defense.

"If there were only time, Doc," he said to me, "I'd build a flock of planes that would make 'em look like thirty cents."

Lakla hovered about him like a worried honey-bee.

Then, suddenly, without warning, dropped the tragedy.

"Larry darlin'," said the handmaiden, "the Silent Ones bid me say the time is come for them to ask us the question. They say, too, Goodwin, that they would have you there—because should you return to your own world there are things within your spirit to which they would set flame," she added.

She drew Larry's arm about her, clasped it, began to move slowly with him out of the chamber.

"The Three love me," she murmured. "I know they do—and you, too, Larry. And yet it is as though I felt a door closing behind us. The door that leads to freedom, Larry; nay, even a door that bars the road of life!"

At his exclamation she gathered herself together; gave a shaky little laugh.

"It's because I love you so that fear has power to plague me," she told him.

Without another word he bent and kissed her; in silence we passed on, his arm still about her girdled waist, golden head and black close together. Soon we stood before the crimson slab that was the door to the sanctuary of the Silent Ones. She poised uncertainly before it. Then with a defiant arching of the proud little head that sent all the bronze-flecked curls flying, she pressed. It slipped aside and once more the opalescence gushed out, flooding all about us.

Dazzled as before, I followed through the lambent cascades pouring from the high, carved walls; paused, and my eyes clearing, looked up—straight into the faces of the Three. They gazed down upon us over the rushing, veined and shadowed mists of curdled moon radiance streaming

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upward from the rim of their dais; from the marble-white faces, the jet triangles of eyes filled with the tiny, leaping red flames burned.

The angled orbs centered upon the handmaiden; softened as I had seen them do when first we had faced the Three. She smiled up; seemed to listen.

"Come closer," she commanded, "close to the feet of the Silent Ones."

We moved, pausing at the very base of the dais. The sparkling mists thinned; the great heads bent slightly over us. Through the veils I caught a glimpse of huge columnar necks, enormous shoulders covered with draperies as of pale-blue fire. It came to me that these beings must be eighteen or twenty feet tall, giants indeed. And what were the hidden shapes beneath the half-revealed necks and shoulders?

I came back to attention with a start, for Lakla was answering a question only heard by her; and, answering it aloud, I perceived for our benefit. For whatever was the mode of communication between those whose handmaiden she was, and her, it was clearly independent of speech.

"He has been told," she said, "even as you commanded."

DID I see a shadow of pain flit across the flickering eyes? Wondering, I glanced at Lakla's face and there was a dawn of foreboding and bewilderment. For a little she held her listening attitude; then the gaze of the Three left her; focused upon the O'Keefe.

"Thus speak the Silent Ones, through Lakla, their handmaiden." The golden voice was like low trumpet notes. "At the threshold of doom is that world of yours above. Yea, even the doom, Goodwin, that ye dreamed and the shadow of which, looking into your mind they see, say the Three.

"Doom, they say, utter doom and the end of all things; cruelty and wickedness unspeakable; slavery most evil and at the last a dead-alive globe menacing the firmament. For not upon earth and never upon earth can man find means to destroy the Shining One. And free there, enthroned, the Shining One will know the strength it has and that now it does not know it has. Nor, say they, does it need that court which Lugur and Yolara plan to follow it. It does not even need Yolara. Power it has to make its own court on earth as soon as free—and none of these things does the Shining One yet know. But all of them it will know once it spreads its wings beneath sun as well as moon!"

She listened again, and the foreboding deepened to an amazed fear.

"They say, the Silent Ones," she went on, "that they know not whether they have power to destroy that which they made—even now. Energies we know nothing of entered into its shaping and are part of it; and still other energies it has gathered to itself." She paused; a shadow, of puzzlement crept into her voice. "And other energies still, forces that ye *do* know and symbolize by certain names—hatred and pride and lust and many others which are forces real as that hidden in the Keth; and among them — fear, which weakens all those others—" Again she paused.

"But within it is nothing of that greatest of all, that which can make powerless all the evil others, that which we call love," she ended softly.

"I'd like to be the one to put a little more *fear* in the beast," whispered Larry to me, grimly in our own English. The three weird heads bent, ever so slightly; a gleam as of approval flitted through the eyes. I gasped, and Larry grew a little white as Lakla nodded.

"They say, Larry," she said, "that there you touch one side of the heart of the matter. For it is through the way of fear the Silent Ones hope to strike at the very life of the Shining One!"

The visage Larry turned to me was eloquent of wonder; and mine reflected it, for what *really* were this Three to whom our minds were but open pages, so easily read? Not long could be conjecture; Lakla broke the little silence.

"This, they say, is what is to happen. First will come upon us Lugur and Yolara

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with all their host. Because of fear the Shining One will lurk behind within its lair; for despite all, the Dweller does dread the Three, and only them. With this host the Voice and the priestess will strive to conquer. And if they do, then will they be strong enough, too, to destroy us all. Also, if they take the abode they banish from the Dweller all fear and sound the end of the Three.

"Then will the Shining One be all free indeed; free to go out into the world, free to do there as it wills!

"But if they do not conquer—and the Shining One comes not to their aid, abandoning them even as it abandoned its own Taithu—then will the Three be loosed from a part of their doom, and they will go through the Portal, seek the Shining One beyond the veil, and piercing it through fear's opening, destroy it."

"That's quite clear," murmured the O'Keefe in my ear. "Weaken the morale—then smash."

Lakla had been listening again. She turned, thrust out hands to Larry, a wild hope in her eyes, and yet a hope half shamed.

"They say," she cried, "that they give us choice. Remembering that your world doom hangs in the balance, we have choice—choice to stay and help fight Yolara's armies—and they say they look not lightly on that help. Or choice to go. And if so be you choose the latter, then will they show another way that leads into the passage through which you came, and that opens also into the Chamber of the Moon Pool.

"There, carrying food and drink, shall we stay until the Moon opens the door; and after that bring what means we may to destroy the Pool and seal up that gateway of the Shining One. Yet they bid me say, too, that if they are beaten, the Shining One will surely find other ways to go forth, though perhaps not in our time," she ended.

A flush had crept over O'Keefe's face as she was speaking. He took her hands and looked long into the golden eyes; glancing up I saw the Trinity were watching them intently, imperturbably.

"What do you say, *mavourneen?*" asked Larry gently. The handmaiden hung her head; trembled.

"Your words shall be mine, O one I love," she whispered. "So going or staying, I am beside you."

"And you, Goodwin?" he turned to me. I shrugged my shoulders. After all, I had no one to care.

"It's up to you, Larry," I remarked.

The O'Keefe straightened, squared his shoulders, gazed straight into the flame-flickering eyes.

"We stick!" he said briefly.

The marble visages of the Three softened, and the little flames died down. Then Lakla started, plainly surprised.

"Wait," she said, "there is one other thing they say we must answer before they will hold us to that promise. Wait!"

She listened, and then her face grew white—white as those of the Three themselves. The glorious eyes widened, stark terror filling them. The whole lithe body of her shook like a reed in the wind.

"Not that!" she cried out to the Three. "Oh, not that! Not Larry! Let me go even as you will, but not him!" She threw up frantic hands to the woman-being of the Trinity. "Let *me* bear it alone," she wailed. "Alone—mother! Mother!"

The Three bent their heads toward her, their faces pitiful, and from the eyes of the woman One rolled tears. Larry leaped to Lakla's side.

"*Mavourneen!*" he cried. "Sweetheart, what have they said to you?"

He glared up at the Silent Ones, his hand twitching toward the high-hung pistol holster.

THE handmaiden swung to him; threw white arms around his neck; held her head upon his heart until her sobbing ceased.

"This they—say—the — Silent Ones," she gasped; and then all the courage of her came back. "O heart of mine!" she whispered to Larry, gazing deep into his

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eyes, his anxious face cupped between her white palms. "This they say—that should the Shining One come to succor Yolara and Lugur, should it conquer its fear and do this, then is there but one way left to destroy it and to save your world."

She swayed; he gripped her tightly.

"But one way. You and I must walk together into its embrace! Yes, we must pass within it—loving each other, loving the world, realizing to the full all that we sacrifice and sacrificing all, our love, our lives, perhaps even that you call soul, O loved one; must give ourselves *all* to the Shining One—gladly, freely, our love for each other flaming high within us—that this curse that threatens your earth shall pass away! For if we do this, pledge the Three, then shall that power of love we carry into it weaken and baffle for a time all that evil which the Shining One has become, and in that time the Three can strike and slay!"

The blood rushed from my heart; scientist that I am, essentially, my reason rejected any such solution as this of the activities of the Dweller. Then into the whirling vortex of my mind came steadying reflections—of history changed by the power of hate, of passion, of ambition, and most of all, by love. Was there not actual dynamic energy in these things? Was there not a Son of Man who hung upon a cross on Calvary?

"Dear love o' mine," said the O'Keefe quietly, "is it in your heart to say yes to this?"

"Larry," she spoke low, "what is in your heart is in mine; but I did so want to go with you, to live with you. To—to bear you children, Larry—and to see the sun."

My eyes were wet with tears; dimly through them I saw his gaze on me.

"If the world *is* at stake," he whispered, "why of course there's only one thing to do."

He turned to the Three—and did I in their poise sense a rigidity, an anxiety that sat upon them as alienly as would divinity upon men?

"Tell me this, Silent Ones," he cried. "If we do this, Lakla and I, is it sure you are that you can slay the Thing, and save my world?"

For the first and the last time, I heard the voice of the Silent Ones. It was the man-being at the right who spoke.

"We are sure," he said, and the tones rolled out like deepest organ notes, shaking, vibrating, assailing the ears more strangely than their appearance struck the eyes. Another moment the O'Keefe stared at them. Then I saw conviction spread over his face. Once more he squared his shoulders; lifted Lakla's chin and smiled into her eyes.

"We stick!" he said again, nodded to the Three.

Over the visages of the Trinity fell benignity that was awesome. The tiny flames in the jet orbs vanished, leaving them wells in which brimmed serenity, hope—an extraordinary joyfulness. The woman sat upright, tender gaze fixed upon the man and girl. I saw her great shoulders raise as though she had lifted her arms and had drawn to her those others. The three faces pressed together for a fleeting moment; raised again. The woman bent forward, and, as she did so, Lakla and Larry, as though drawn by some outer force, were swept against the dais.

Out from the sparkling mist stretched two hands, enormously long, sixfingered, thumbless, a faint tracery of golden scales upon their white backs. Utterly unhuman and still in some strange way beautiful, radiating power and—all womanly!

They stretched forth; they touched the bent heads of Lakla and the O'Keefe; caressed them, drew them together, softly stroked them lovingly, with more than a touch of benediction. And withdrew!

The sparkling mists rolled up once more, hiding the Silent Ones. As silently as once before we had gone, we passed out of the place of light, beyond the crimson stone, back to the handmaiden's chamber.

Only once on our way did Larry speak.

"Cheer up, darlin'," he said to her, "it's a long way yet before the finish. An' are you thinking that Luger and Yolara are

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going to pull this thing off? Are you?"

The handmaiden only looked at him, eyes love and sorrow filled.

"They are!" said Larry. "They are! Like hell they are!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE MEETING OF TITANS

IT IS not my intention, nor is it possible no matter how interesting to me, to set down *ad seriatum* the happenings of the next twelve hours. But a few will not be denied recital.

Lakla, shining-eyed, filled with extremely grateful news—

"The Three say again to have no fear of the Keth, nor for aught else of the weapons of light of Yolara," she said. "The Akka must face them, it is true—and would I could help my people," she sighed.

"But against us here, or the bridge or the abode, those things will be helpless. I have other tidings that I am afraid will please you little, Larry darlin'." She was half fearful. "The Silent Ones say that you must not go into battle yourself. You must stay here with me, and with Goodwin—for if—if—the Shining One does come, then must we be here to meet it. And you might not be, you, know, Larry, if you fight," she said, looking shyly up at him from under the long lashes.

The O'Keefe's jaw dropped. "That's about the hardest yet," he answered slowly.

Olaf's fierce joy in the coming fray—

"The Norns spin close to the end of this web," he rumbled. "*Ja!* And the threads of Lugur and the Heks woman are between their fingers for the breaking! Thor will be with me, and I have fashioned me a hammer in glory of Thor." In his hand was an enormous mace of black metal, fully five feet long, crowned with a massive head. "I fashioned it at a forge of the frog-men from something I found here."

"But I go not from here," he said. "No, the gods tell me I shall not. I know that mine Helma is to be freed from death-in-life, and we go out together as we sailed together—to meet the *Yndling! Ja!*"

My own perplexity—

Could it be a trap? I remembered the strange triangular eyes of the Three—the same that had appeared around Lakla when she watched over Larry's slumber. I asked her about them and she shook her head, seemed worried.

She had thought herself alone.

I pass to the twelve hours' closing.

At the end of the coria road where the giant fern-land met the edge of the cavern's ruby floor, hundreds of the Akka were stationed in ambush, armed with their spears tipped with the rotting death and their nail-studded, metal-headed clubs. These were to attack when the Murians debouched from the corials. We had little hope of doing more here than effect some attrition of Yolara's hosts, for at this place the captains of the Shining One could wield the Keth and their other uncanny weapons freely. We had learned, too, that every forge and artisan had been put to work to make an armor Von Hetzdorp had devised to withstand the natural battle equipment of the frog-people—and both Larry and I had a disquieting faith in the German's ingenuity.

At any rate the numbers against us would be lessened.

Next, under the direction of the frog-king, levies commanded by subsidiary chieftains had completed the rows of rough walls along the probable route of the Murians through the cavern. These afforded the Akka a fair protection behind which they could hurl their darts and spears.

At the opening of the cavern the strong barricade we had planned stretched almost to the two ends of the crescent strand. Almost, I say, because there had not been time to build it entirely across the mouth.

And from edge to edge of the Titanic bridge, from where it sprang outward at the shore of the Crimson Sea to a hundred feet away from the golden door of the abode, barrier after barrier was piled.

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BEHIND the wall defending the mouth of the cavern waited other thousands of the Akka. At each end of the unfinished barricade they were mustered thickly, and at right and left of the crescent where their forests began, more legions were assembled to make way up to the ledge as opportunity offered.

Rank upon rank they manned the bridge barriers. They swarmed over the pinnacles and in the hollows of the island's ragged outer lips. The domed castle was a hive of them, if I may mix metaphors—and the rocks and gardens that surrounded the abode glittered with them.

In one particular we were very greatly handicapped. None but Lakla could speak the language of the frog-people, and therefore none of us three men—I leave Larry out because of the prohibition laid upon him—could command them.

"But it does not really matter," consoled Lakla. "My Akka know not fear, and they will fight each *man* of them to the end."

Upon their stick-at-itiveness, fearlessness, and the sheer weight of their numbers we had, perforce, to rest our hopes. It was primitive strategy, no doubt, but what else could we do? And at last, when all was finished, the handmaiden came to us, rather guiltily, bearing with her frog-woman armsful of metallic robes like that she had worn when she faced Yolara in the banquet hall.

"They are shields against the Keth," she explained.

"But, darlin', the Three have said that we need not fear the Keth here," objected Larry.

"I know," she said; "but I'd feel much better if you wore one, Larry," she ended defiantly.

"Far be it from me to give you any more worry than you've got," answered the O'Keefe, and he donned one. Rador and I —then Olaf, after a little hesitation—followed his example.

Upon Nak, the Frog King, she threw another, showing him how to cover his great eyes, and then, because the folds came hardly to his knees, she cut the hem from another, stitching it rapidly on with a long needle of curious iridescent metal. Of the robes left there were enough to cover three of his captains. And queer enough the four looked as they strode away, out upon the bridge to take their places at the head of their forces.

"Now," said the handmaiden, "there's nothing else we can do, save wait."

She led us out through her bower and up the little path that ran to the embrasure I have described in a previous chapter.

We watched, all of us—even Lakla, to whom the sight was at least partly familiar—a little awed. Intensifying the awe was the silence that brooded over the place. There were no boomings or croakings from the frog-men, thrown like a glinting carpet across the span, gleaming dimly on the crescent.

Then through that silence came a sound, a sighing, a half-mournful whispering that beat about us and fled away.

"They come!" cried Lakla, the light of battle in her eyes. Larry drew her to him, raised her in his arms, kissed her.

"A woman!" acclaimed the O'Keefe. "A real woman—and mine!"

He kissed her again; set her upon her feet.

"An' never tell me Lakla's not Irish," he said to me.

With the cry of the Portal the silence was broken definitely. There was movement among the Akka, the glint of moving spears, flash of metal-tipped clubs, rattle of horny spurs, rumblings of battlecries.

And we waited—waited it seemed interminably, gaze fastened upon the low wall across the cavern mouth. Suddenly I remembered the crystal through which I had peered when the hidden assassins had crept upon us. Mentioning it to Lakla she gave a little cry of vexation, a command to her attendant; and not long after that faithful if unusual lady had returned with a tray of glasses.

Raising my glass, I saw the lines furthest away leap into sudden activity. Spurred warrior after warrior leaped upon

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the barricade and over it. Flashes of intense green light, mingled with gleams like lightning strokes of concentrated moon rays, sprang from behind the wall—sprang and struck and burned upon the scales of the batracians.

"They come!" whispered Lakla. "They have won through! And they use the Keth upon my Akka!" Her hands clenched; her eyes blazed.

At the far ends of the crescent a terrific milling had begun. Here it was plain the Akka were holding. Faintly, for the distance was great, I could see fresh force upon force rush up and take the places of those who had fallen.

Over each of these ends, and along the whole line of the barricade a mist of dancing, diamonded atoms began to rise; sparkling, coruscating points of diamond dust that darted and danced.

What had once been Lakla's guardians dancing now in the nothingness!

"God, but it's hard to stay here like this!" groaned the O'Keefe; Olaf's teeth were bared, the lips drawn back in such a fighting grin as his ancestors berserk on their raven ships must have borne; Rador was livid with rage; the handmaiden's nostrils flaring wide, all her wrathful soul in her eyes.

SUDDENLY, while we looked, the rocky wall which the Akka had built at the cavern mouth—was not! It vanished, as though an unseen, unbelievably gigantic hand had with the lightning's speed swept it away. And with it vanished, too, long lines of the great amphibians close behind it. It was sorcery!

Down upon the ledge, dropping into the Crimson Sea, sending up geysers of ruby spray, dashing on the bridge, crushing the frog-men, fell a shower of stone, mingled with distorted shapes and fragments whose scales still flashed meteoric as they hurled from above.

"That which makes things fall upward," hissed Olaf. "That which I saw in the garden of Lugur!"

The fiendish agency of destruction which Von Hetzdorp had revealed to Larry; the force that cut off gravitation and sent all things within its range racing outward into space! My heart chilled—and now over the debris upon the ledge, striking with long sword and daggers, here and there a captain flashing the green ray, moving on in ordered squares, came the soldiers of the Shining One. Nearer and nearer the verge of the ledge they pushed Nak's warriors. Leaping upon the dwarfs, smiting them with spear and club, with teeth and spur, the Akka fought like devils. Quivering under the ray they leaped and dragged down and slew. Now there was but one long line of them at the very edge of the cliff.

And ever the clouds of dancing, diamonded atoms grew thicker over them all!

That last thin line of the Akka was going; yet they fought to the last, and none toppled over the lip without at least one of the armored Murians in his arms.

There, my gaze dropping to the foot of the cliffs, I grew tense with fascination of horror. Stretched along their length was a wide ribbon of beauty—a shimmering multitude of gleaming, pulsing, prismatic moons; glowing, glowing ever brighter, ever more wondrous—the gigantic *Medusae* globes feasting on dwarf and frog-men alike!

Larry was rigid, his eyes dazed; Lakla, arm around his neck, stood as though turned to stone. Across the waters, faintly, came a triumphant shouting from Lugur's and Yolara's men!

Was the ruddy light of the place lessening, growing paler, changing to a faint rose? I rubbed my eyes, thinking that the strain of watching had dimmed them. No, it was not that. There was an exclamation from Larry; something like hope relaxed the drawn muscles of his face. He pointed to the aureate dome wherein sat the Three—and then I saw!

Out of it, through the long transverse slit through which the Silent Ones kept their watch on cavern, bridge, and abyss, a torrent of the opalescent light was pouring. It cascaded like a waterfall, and as it

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flowed it spread, whirling out in columns and eddies, clouds and wisps of misty, curdled coruscations. It hung like a veil over all the island, filtering everywhere, driving back the crimson light as though possessed of impenetrable substance—and still it cast not the faintest shadowing upon our vision.

"Good God!" breathed Larry. "Look!"

The radiance was *marching* down the colossal bridge. It moved swiftly, in some unthinkable way *intelligently*. It swathed the Akka, and closer, ever closer it swept toward the approach upon which Yolara's men had now gained foothold.

From their ranks came flash after flash of the green ray, aimed at the abode! But as the light sped and struck the opalescence it was blotted out! The shimmering mists seemed to enfold, to dissipate it—as, it came to me, the rays of an automobile headlight are checked by fog.

Lakla drew a deep breath.

"The Silent Ones forgive me for doubting them," she whispered; and again hope blossomed on her face even as it did on Larry's.

The frog-men were gaining. Clothed in the armor of that mist they pressed back from the bridge-head the invaders. There was another prodigious movement at the ends of the crescent, and racing up, pressing against the dwarfs, came other legions of Nak's warriors. And reenforcing those out on the prodigious arch, the frog-men stationed in the gardens below us poured back to the castle and out through the open Portal.

"They're licked!" shouted Larry. "They're—"

So quickly I could not follow the movement, his automatic leaped to his hand—spoke, once and again and again. Rador leaped to the head of the little path, sword in hand. Olaf, shouting and whirling his mace, followed. I strove to get my own gun quickly.

For up that path were running twoscore of Lugur's men, while from below Lugur's own voice roared.

"Quick! Slay not the handmaiden or her lover! Carry them down. Quick! But slay the others!"

The handmaiden raced toward Larry, stopped, whistled shrilly—again and again. Larry's pistol was empty, but as the dwarfs rushed upon him I dropped two of them with mine. It jammed—I could not use it; I sprang to his side. Rador was down, struggling in a heap of Lugur's men. Olaf, a Viking of old, was whirling his great hammer and striking, striking through armor, flesh, and bone.

Larry was down; Lakla flew to him. But the Norseman, now streaming blood from a dozen wounds, caught a glimpse of her coming, turned, thrust out a mighty hand, sent her reeling back. And then with his hammer *cracked* the skulls of those trying to drag the O'Keefe down the path.

A cry from Lakla—the dwarfs had seized her, had lifted her despite her struggle, were carrying her away. One I dropped with the butt of my useless pistol, and then went down myself under the rush of another.

THROUGH the clamor I heard a booming of the Akka, closer, closer; then through it the bellow of Lugur. I made a mighty effort, swung a hand up, and sunk my fingers in the throat of the soldier striving to kill me. Writhing over him, my fingers touched a poniard; I thrust it deep, staggered to my feet.

The O'Keefe, shielding Lakla, was battling with a long sword against a half dozen of the soldiers. I started toward him, was struck, and under the impact hurled to the ground. Dizzily I raised myself—and leaning upon my elbow, stared and moved no more. For the dwarfs lay dead, and Larry, holding Lakla tightly, was staring even as I. And ranged at the head of the path were the Akka, whose booming advance in obedience to the handmaiden's call I had heard.

And at what we all stared was Olaf, crimson with his wounds, and Lugur, in blood-red armor, locked in each other's grip, struggling, smiting, tearing, kicking, and swaying about the little space before

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the embrasure. I crawled over toward the O'Keefe. He raised his pistol, dropped it.

"Can't hit him without hitting Olaf," he whispered. Lakla signaled the frog-men; they advanced toward the two. But Olaf saw them, broke the red dwarf's hold, sent Lugur reeling a dozen feet away.

"No!" shouted the Norseman, the ice of his pale-blue eyes glinting like frozen flames, blood streaming down his face and dripping from his hands. "No! Lugur is mine! None but me slays him! Ho, you Lugur—" And cursed him and Yolara and the Dweller madly, hideously.

They spurred Lugur. Mad now as the Norseman, the red dwarf sprang. Olaf struck a blow that would have killed an ordinary man, but Lugur only grunted, swept in and seized him about the waist; one mighty arm began to creep up toward Huldricksson's throat.

" 'Ware, Olaf!" cried O'Keefe; but Olaf did not answer. He waited until the red dwarf's hand was close to his shoulder. And then, with an incredibly rapid movement—once before had I seen something like it in a wrestling match between Papuans—he had twisted Lugur around; twisted him so that Olaf's right arm lay across the tremendous breast; the left behind the neck. And Olaf's left leg held the Voice's armored thighs viselike against his right knee while over that knee lay the small of the red dwarf's back.

For a second or two the Norseman looked upon his enemy motionless in that paralyzing grip. And then, slowly, he began to break him!

Lakla gave a little cry; made a motion toward the two. But Larry drew her down against his breast, hiding her eyes; then fastened his own upon the pair, white-faced, stern.

Slowly, ever so slowly, proceeded Olaf. Twice Lugur moaned. At the end he screamed—horribly. There was a cracking sound, as of a stout stick snapped.

Huldricksson stooped, silently. He picked up the limp body of the Voice, not yet dead, for the eyes rolled, the lips strove to speak. Lifted it, walked to the parapet, swung it twice over his head. And cast it down to the red waters!

CHAPTER XXXIX

AND THEN—

THE Norseman turned toward us. There was now no madness in his eyes; only a great weariness. And there was peace on the once tortured face.

"Helma," he whispered, "I go a little before! Soon you will come to me—to me and the *Yndling*—who will await you —Helma, *mine liebe!*"

Blood gushed from his mouth; he swayed, fell. And thus died Olaf Huldricksson, one of those upon whom the Dweller's blight had fallen, helping to save his fellow men from the Dweller's soul-destroying curse. Simple-hearted as a child, faithful, fearless, worthy of any of his conquering forefathers, and passing away even as they would have elected to go—and in their ancient faith. Wounds enough to have killed four lesser men he had got in that battle wherein, without him, Lugur's men could not have been held. And even now my marveling how even his strength could have been great enough to do what he did with the red dwarf, is not dulled.

We looked down upon him; nor did Lakla, nor Larry, nor I try to hide our tears. And as we stood the Akka brought to us that other mighty fighter, Rador; but in him there was life, and we attended to him there as best we could.

Then Lakla spoke.

"We will bear him into the castle where we may give him greater care," she said. "For, lo! the hosts of Yolara have been beaten back; and on the bridge comes Nak with tidings."

We looked over the parapet. It was even as she had said. Neither on ledge nor bridge was there trace of living men of Muria. Only heaps of slain that lay everywhere. And thick against the cavern mouth danced the flashing atoms of those the green ray had destroyed. About the dead,

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casting them down to the Crimson Sea and its elf-moon feasters, thronged the Akka.

"Over!" exclaimed Larry incredulously. "We live then, heart of mine!"

"The Silent Ones recall their veils," she said, pointing to the dome. Back through the slitted opening the radiance was streaming; withdrawing from sea and island; marching back over the bridge with that same ordered, intelligent motion. Behind it the red light pressed, like skirmishers on the heels of a retreating army.

"And yet—" faltered Lakla, and was silent. We fell in behind the unconscious Rador, the dead Olaf, both in the arms of the batracians; and there was nothing of jubliance in any of our three hearts.

"And yet—" repeated the handmaiden as we passed into her chamber, and doubtful were the eyes she turned upon the O'Keefe.

"I don't believe there's a kick left in them," said he. "That was some stunt the Three pulled off, Doc."

What was that sound beating into the chamber, faintly, so faintly? My heart gave a great throb and seemed to stop for an eternity. What was it—coming nearer, ever nearer? Now Lakla and O'Keefe heard it, stiffened, life ebbing from lips and cheeks.

Nearer, nearer—a music as of myriads of tiny crystal bells, tinkling, tinkling. A storm of pizzicato upon violins of glass! Nearer, nearer—not sweetly now, nor luring; no—raging, wrathful, sinister beyond words; sweeping on; nearer—

The Dweller! The Shining One!

We leaped to the narrow window; peered out, aghast. The bell notes swept through and about us, a hurricane. The crescent strand was once more a ferment. Back, back were the Akka being swept, as though by brooms, tottering on the edge of the ledge, falling into the waters. Swiftly they were finished; and where they had fought was an eddying throng of women and men, clothed in tatters or wholly nude, swaying, drifting, arms tossing—like marionettes of Satan.

The dead-alive! The slaves of the Dweller!

They swayed and tossed, and then, like water racing through an opened dam, they swept upon the bridge-head. On and on they pushed, like the bore of a mighty tide. The frog-men strove against them, clubbing, spearing, tearing them. But even those worst smitten seemed not to fall. On they pushed, driving forward, irresistible—a battering ram of flesh and bone.

They clove the masses of the Akka, pressing them to the sides of the bridge and over. Nor did the fact that every huge amphibian that fell carried in his horny arms one of them, seem to lessen their numbers. Back and back they forced those of Nak's warriors who still found footing on the span. Through the open Portal they forced them, for there was no room for the frog-men to stand against that implacable tide.

Then those of the Akka who were left turned their backs and ran. We heard the clang of the golden wings of the gateway, and none too soon to keep out the first of the Dweller's dreadful hordes.

Now upon the cavern ledge and over the whole length of the bridge there were none but the dead-alive, men and women, black-polled *ladala*, sloe-eyed Malays, slant-eyed Chinese, men of every race that sailed the seas—milling, turning, swaying, like leaves caught in a sluggish current.

The bell notes became sharper, more insistent. At the cavern mouth a radiance began to grow—a gleaming from which the atoms of diamond dust seemed to try to fly. And now occurred what to me was the ghastliest incident—save one, which I have yet to relate—of all this incredible scene. As the radiance grew and the crystal notes rang nearer, every head of that hideous multitude turned stiffly, slowly toward the right, looking toward the far bridge end; their eyes fixed and glaring; every face an inhuman mask of rapture and of horror!

A movement shook them, as though at some command. Those in the center began

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to stream back, faster and ever faster, leaving motionless deep ranks on each side. Back they flowed until from golden doors to cavern mouth a wide lane stretched, walled on each side by the dead-alive.

The far radiance grew brighter still; it gathered itself at the end of the gruesome lane; it was shot with sparklings and with pulsings of polychromatic light. The crystal storm grew intolerable, piercing the ears with countless tiny lances; brighter still the radiance—

From the cavern swirled the Shining one!

THE Dweller paused, seemed to scan the island of the Silent Ones half doubtfully; then slowly, stately, it drifted out upon the bridge. My hand was gripped in a bitter clasp; I saw Larry was holding it. Closer drew the Shining One; behind it glided Yolara at the head of a company of her dwarfs, and at her side was the hag of the council whose face was the withered, shattered echo of her own.

Slower grew the Dweller's pace as it drew nearer. Did I sense in it a doubt, an uncertainty? The crystal-tongued, unseen choristers that accompanied it subtly seemed to reflect the doubt; their notes were not sure, no longer insistent; rather was there in them an undertone of hesitancy, of warning! Yet on came the Shining One until it stood plain beneath us, searching with those eyes that thrust from and withdrew into unknown spheres, the golden gateway, the cliff face, the castle's rounded bulk—and more intently than any of these, the dome wherein sat the Three.

Behind it each face of the dead-alive turned toward it, and those beside it throbbed and gleamed with its luminescence.

Yolara crept close, just beyond the reach of its spirals. Rosy shone her flesh through her gossamer veils, blue as pale sapphires were her eyes, and in the radiance of the Shining One the coronal of corn-silk tresses sparkled. Once more, even in our deadly peril, I realized how beautiful was the priestess. She raised her face, looking straight toward where we watched, as though her glance had been summoned by our gaze. She murmured—and the head of the Dweller bent toward her, its seven globes steady in their shining mists, as though listening. It listened, drew itself erect once more, resumed its doubtful scrutiny. Yolara's face darkened; she turned abruptly, spoke to a captain of her guards. A dwarf raced back between the palisades of dead-alive.

Now the priestess cried out, her voice ringing like a silver clarion.

"Ye are done, ye Three! The Shining One stands at your door, demanding entrance. Your beasts are slain and your power is gone. Who are ye, says the Shining One, to deny it entrance to the place of its birth?" There was biting mockery in this last. "Now will ye open your doors and let us pass, or must we open them for ye?" She paused. No answer came from those upon whom she was calling.

"Ye do not answer," she cried again, "yet know we that ye hear! The Shining One offers these terms: Send forth your handmaiden and that lying stranger she stole; send them forth to us—and perhaps ye may live. But if ye send them not forth, then shall ye, too, die—and soon!"

An odd paralysis had gripped us, but it was not of fear. None of fear did I feel—at least none for myself—and searching the eyes of Lakla and Larry, I saw no trace of it in either. Rather was it an inhibition. Something that stilled all desire to speak, as though a hand had been laid over my mouth. We waited, silent, even as did Yolara. And still there was no answer from the Three.

The priestess laughed.

"It is ended!" she cried. "If you will not open, needs must we open for you!"

Over the bridge was marching a long double file of the dwarfs. They bore a smoothed and handled tree-trunk whose head was knobbed with a huge ball of metal. Past the priestess, past the Shining One, they carried it; fifty of them to each side of the ram; and behind them stepped—Von Hetzdorp!

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Larry awoke to life.

"Now, thank God," he rasped, "I can get the Heinie, anyway!"

He drew his pistol, took careful aim. Even as he pressed the trigger there rang through the abode a tremendous clanging. The ram was battering at the gates. O'Keefe's bullet went wild. The German must have heard the shot; perhaps the missile was closer than we knew. He made a swift leap behind the guards, was lost to sight.

Once more the thunderous clanging rang through the castle.

Lakla drew herself erect; down upon her dropped the listening aloofness.

"It is time, O love of mine." She turned to O'Keefe. "The Silent Ones say that the way of fear is closed, but the way of love is open. They call upon us to redeem our promise!"

For a hundred heart-beats they clung to each other, breast to breast and lip to lip. Below, the clangor was increasing, the great trunk swinging harder and faster upon the metal gates. Now Lakla gently loosed the arms of the O'Keefe, and for another instant those two looked deep into each other's souls. The handmaiden smiled tremulously.

"I would it might have been otherwise, Larry darlin'," she whispered. "But at least —we pass together, dearest of mine!"

She leaped to the window.

"Yolara!" the golden voice rang out sweetly. The clanging ceased. "Draw back your men. We open the Portal and come forth to you and the Shining One—Larry and I."

The priestess's silver chimes of laughter rang out, cruel, mocking.

"Come, then, and quickly," she jeered. "For surely both the Shining One and I have long yearned for you!" Her malice-laden laughter chimed high once more. "Keep us not lonely long!" the priestess mocked.

LARRY drew a deep breath, stretched both hands out to me.

"It's good-by, I guess, Doc." His voice was strained. "Good-by and good luck, old boy. If you get out, and you will, let the old *Dolphin* know I'm gone. And carry on, pal—and always remember the O'Keefe loved you like a brother."

I squeezed his hands desperately. Then out of my balance-shaking woe a strange comfort was born.

"Maybe it's not good-by, Larry!" I cried. "The banshee has not cried!"

A flash of hope passed over his face; the old reckless grin shone forth.

"It's so!" he said. "By the Lord, it's so!"

Then Lakla bent toward me, and for the second time—kissed me.

"Come!" she said to Larry. Hand in hand they moved away, into the corridor that led to the door outside of which waited the Shining One and its beautiful priestess.

And unseen by them, wrapped as they were within their love and sacrifice, I crept softly behind. For I had determined that if enter the Dweller's embrace they must, they should not go alone. There was no one to mourn for me—and it had come clearly to my mind that without them I did not care to live. Nothing of this had I spoken—for well I knew that they would have forbidden it.

They paused before the Golden Portals; the handmaiden pressed its opening lever; the massives leaves rolled back.

Heads high, proudly, serenely, they passed through and out upon the hither span. I followed.

On each side of us stood the Dweller's slaves, faces turned rigidly toward their master. A hundred feet way the Shining One pulsed and spiraled in its evilly glorious lambency of sparkling plumes.

Unhestitating, always with that same high serenity, Lakla and the O'Keefe, hands clasped like little children, drew closer to that wondrous shape of nebulous flame. I could not see their faces, but I saw awe fall upon those of the watching dwarfs, and into the burning eyes of Yolara crept a doubt.

Closer they drew to the Dweller, and

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closer, I following them step by step. The Shining One's whirling lessened; its tinklings were faint, almost stilled. It seemed to watch them apprehensively. A silence fell upon us all, a thick silence, brooding, ominous, palpable. Now the pair were face to face with the child of the Three—so near that with one of its misty tentacles it could have enfolded them.

And the Shining One drew back!

Yes, drew back—and back with it stepped Yolara, the doubt in her eyes deepening. Onward paced the handmaiden and the O'Keefe. Step by step, as they advanced, the Dweller withdrew; its bell notes chiming out, puzzled, questioning—half fearful!

And back it drew, and back until it had reached the very center of that platform over the abyss in whose depths pulsed the green fires of earth heart. And there Yolara gripped herself; the hell that laughed within her soul leaped out of her eyes; a cry, a shriek of rage, tore them from her lips.

As at a signal, the Shining One flamed high; its spirals and eddying mists swirled madly, the pulsing core of it blazed radiance.

A score of coruscating tentacles swept straight upon the pair who stood intrepid, unresisting, awaiting its embrace. And upon me, lurking behind them.

Through me swept a mighty exaltation. It was the end, then— and I was to meet it with them.

Something drew us back, back with an incredible swiftness, and yet as gently as a summer breeze a bit of thistledown! Drew us back from those darting misty arms even as they were a hairbreadth from us! I heard the Dweller's bell notes burst out ragingly; I heard Yolara scream.

What was that?

Between the three of us and them was a ring of curdled moon flames, swirling about the Shining One and its priestess, pressing in upon them, enfolding them!

And within it I glimpsed the faces of the Three—implacable, sorrowful, filled with a supernal power!

SPARKS and flashes of white flame darted from the ring, penetrated the radiant swathings of the Dweller, striking through its pulsing nucleus, piercing its seven crowning orbs.

Now the Shining One's radiance began to lessen, the seven orbs to dull. The tiny sparkling filaments that ran from them down into the Dweller's body snapped, vanished! Through the battling nebulosities Yolara's face swam forth—horror-filled, distorted, inhuman!

The ranks of the dead-alive quivered, moved, writhed, as though each felt the torment of the Thing that had enslaved them. The radiance that the Three wielded grew more intense, thicker, seemed to expand. Within it, suddenly, were scores of flaming triangles—scores of eyes like those of the Silent Ones!

And the Shining One's seven little moons of amber, of silver, of blue and amethyst and green, of rose and white, split, shattered, were gone! Abruptly the tortured crystal chimings ceased.

And dulled, all its soul-shaking beauty dead, blotched, and shadowed squalidly, its gleaming plumes tarnished, its dancing spirals stripped from it, that which had been the Shining One wrapped itself about Yolara. Wrapped and drew her into itself; writhed, swayed, and hurled itself over the edge of the bridge—down, down into the green fires of the unfathomable abyss—with its priestess still enfolded in its coils!

From the soldiers who, rigid as stone, had watched that terror, came crazed screams of panic fear. They turned and ran, racing frantically over the bridge toward the cavern mouth.

The serried ranks of the dead-alive trembled, shook. Then from their faces fled the horror of wedded ecstasy and anguish. Peace, utter peace, followed eventually in its wake.

And as fields of wheat are bent and fall beneath the wind, they fell. No longer dead-alive, now all of the blessed dead, freed from their dreadful slavery!

We stood, Lakla and I, silent, stunned, half dead ourselves through the fearful-

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ness of it all; souls well-nigh blasted by what we had seen—and saw.

Abruptly from the sparkling mists the cloud of eyes were gone. Faintly revealed in them were only the heads of the Silent Ones. And they drew before us; were before us! No flames now in their ebon eyes—for the flickering fires were quenched in great tears, streaming down the marble white faces. They bent toward us, over us; their radiance enfolded us. My eyes darkened. I could not see. I felt a tender hand upon my head—and panic and frozen dread and nightmare web that held me fled.

I was happy!

Then they, too, were gone.

Far away was a great shouting. Over the body-strewn crescent strand came pouring regiments of the Akka; out of the cavern mouth upon the bridge marched companies of the *ladala*.

Upon Larry's breast the handmaiden was sobbing—sobbing out her heart. But this time it was with the joy of one who is swept up from the very threshold of hell into paradise.

CHAPTER XL

VON HETZDORP STRIKES!

"MY heart, Larry—" It was the handmaiden's murmur. "My heart feels like a bird that is flying from a nest of sorrow."

We were pacing down the length of the bridge, guards of the Akka beside us, others following with those companies of the *ladala* that had rushed to aid us. In front of us the bandaged Rador swung gently within a litter; beside him, in another, lay Nak, the Frog King— much less of him than there had been before the battle begun, but living.

Hours had passed since the terror I have just related. My first task had been to search for Throckmartin and his wife among the fallen multitudes strewn thick as autumn leaves along the flying arch of stone, over the cavern ledge, and back, back as far as the eye could reach. Had they been of those who, clutched in the arms of the amphibians, had dropped by the thousands into the red waters where now myriad upon myriad of the giant *Medusae* feasted and gleamed? Fervently I prayed that their bodies had been spared that at least.

At last, Lakla and Larry helping, we found them. They lay close to the bridge-end, not parted—locked tight in each other's arms, pallid face to face, her hair streaming over his breast! As though when that unearthly life the Dweller had set within them passed away, their own had come back for one fleeting instant—and they had known each other, and clasped before kindly death had taken them.

"Love is stronger than all things." The handmaiden was weeping softly. "Love never left them. Love was stronger than the Shining One. And when its evil fled, love went with them—wherever souls go."

Of Stanton and Thora there was no trace; nor, after our discovery of those other two, did I care to look more. They were dead—and they were free.

We buried Throckmartin and Edith beside Olaf in Lakla's bower. But before the body of my old friend was placed within the grave I gave it a careful and sorrowful examination. The skin was firm and smooth, but cold; not the cold of death, but with a chill that set my touching fingers tingling unpleasantly.

The body was bloodless; the course of veins and arteries marked by faintly indented white furrows, as though their walls had long collapsed. Lips, mouth, even the tongue, were paper-white. Yet there was no sign of dissolution, as we know it; no shadow or stain upon the marble surface. Whatever the force that, streaming from the Dweller or impregnating its lair, had energized the dead-alive, it was barrier against putrescence of any kind; that at least was certain.

But it was not barrier against the poison of the *Medusae*, for, our sad task done, and looking down upon the waters, I saw the pale forms of the Dweller's hordes dissolving, vanishing into the shifting glories

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of the gigantic moons sailing down upon them from every quarter of the Sea of Crimson.

While the frog-men, those late levies from the farthest forests, were clearing bridge and ledge of cavern of the litter of the dead, we listened to the leader of the *ladala*. They had risen, as the messenger had promised Rador. Fierce had been the struggle in the gardened city by the silver waters with those Lugur and Yolara had left behind to garrison it. Deadly had been the slaughter of the fair-haired, reaping the harvest of hatred they had been sowing so long. Not without a pang of regret did I think of the beautiful, gaily malicious elfin women destroyed—even though they may have been.

The ancient city of Lara, where the enigmatic Taithu had dwelt before the Murians came to it, was a charnel. Of all the rulers not twoscore had escaped, and these into regions of peril which to describe as sanctuary would be mockery. Nor had the *ladala* escaped so well. Of all the men and women, for women as well as men had taken their part in the swift war, not more than a tenth remained alive.

And the dancing motes of light in the silver air were thick, thick—they whispered.

They told us of the Shining One rushing through the Veil, comet like, its hosts streaming behind it, raging with it, in ranks that seemed interminable!

Of the massacre of the priests and priestesses in the Cyclopean temple; of the flashing of the summoning lights by some unseen hands—followed by the tearing of the rainbow curtain, by colossal shattering of the radiant cliffs; the vanishing behind their débris of all traces of entrance to the haunted place wherein the hordes of the Shining One had slaved—the sealing of the lair!

Then, when the tempest of hate had ended in immortal Lara, how, thrilled with victory, armed with the weapons of those they had slain, they had lifted the Shadow, passed through the Portal, met and slaughtered the fleeting remnants of Yolara's men—only to find the tempest stilled here, too.

But of Von Hetzdorp they had seen nothing. Had the German escaped, I wondered, or was he lying out there among the dead? But how could he have escaped? And even should he by some miracle be able to pass the Portal, what chance was there for him beyond? None, it seemed to me; and slender indeed the chance that he had survived the débacle. Still, it was strange that none of these had seen him with those fear-crazed troops racing straight into their arms.

BUT now the *ladala* were calling upon Lakla to come with them, to govern them.

"I don't want to, Larry darlin'," she told him. "I want to go out with you to Ireland. But for a time—I think the Three would have us remain and set that place in order."

The O'Keefe was bothered about something else than the government of Muria.

"If they've killed off all the priests, who's to marry us, heart of mine?" he worried. "None of those Siya and Siyana rites, no matter what," he added hastily.

"Marry!" cried the handmaiden incredulously. "Marry us? Why, Larry dear, we *are* married!"

The O'Keefe's astonishment was complete; his jaw dropped; collapse seemed imminent.

"We are?" he gasped. "When?" he stammered fatuously.

"Why, when the mother drew us together before her; when she put her hands on our heads after we had made the promise! Didn't you understand that?" asked the handmaiden wonderingly.

He looked at her, into the purity of the clear golden eyes, into the purity of the soul that gazed out of them; all his own great love transfiguring his keen face.

"An' is that enough for you, *mavourneen?*" he whispered humbly.

"Enough?" The handmaiden's puzzlement was complete, profound. "Enough! Larry darlin', what more could we ask?"

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He drew a deep breath, clasped her close.

"Kiss the bride, Doc!" cried the O'Keefe. And for the third and, soul's sorrow! the last time, Lakla dimpling and blushing, I thrilled to the touch of her soft, sweet lips.

"As soon as we get up above, it's straight to a Christian altar we go," murmured Larry to me. "But what she says is so. Nothing holier than what I felt when the women blessed us do I ever expect to know, even"—he laughed a bit shakily—"if I didn't realize it was a married man she was making me."

Quickly were our preparations for departure made. Rador, conscious, his immense vitality conquering fast his wounds, was to be borne ahead of us. And when all was done Lakla, Larry, and I made our way up to the scarlet stone that was the doorway to the chamber of the Three.

We knew, of course, that they had gone, following, no doubt, those whose eyes I had seen in the curdled mists, and who, coming to the aid of the Three at last from whatever mysterious place that was their home, had thrown their strength with them against the Shining One. Nor were we wrong. When the great slab rolled away, no torrents of opalescence came rushing out upon us. The vast dome was dim, tenantless. Its curved walls that had cascaded light shone now but faintly. The dais was empty; its wall of moon-flame radiance gone.

A little time we stood, heads bent, reverent, our hearts filled with gratitude and love—yes, and with pity for that strange trinity so alien to us and yet so near. Children even as we, though so unlike us, of our same Mother Earth.

And what, I wondered, had been the secret of that promise they had wrung from their handmaiden and from Larry? And whence, if what the Three had said had all been true—whence had come their power to avert the sacrifice at the very verge of its consummation? Had it been a test of these two—a test as unconscious in its cruelty as any of those exacted by Divinity, the stories of which fill the legends of mankind? The comparison is not irreverent—for in wisdom, as compared to mankind, the Three were divine.

"Love is stronger than all things!" had said Lakla.

Was it that they had needed, must have, the force which dwells within love, within willing sacrifice, to strengthen their own power and to enable them to destroy the evil, glorious Thing so long shielded by their own love? Did the thought of sacrifice, the will toward abnegation, have to be as strong as the eternals, unshaken by faintest thrill of hope, before the Three could make of it their key to unlock the Dweller's guard and strike through at its life?

Here was a mystery—a mystery indeed!

Then Lakla softly closed the crimson stone and we passed down—down the corridors, out of the abode, to where, upon the span, a few score of the handmaiden's own black-and-orange-scaled warriors awaited us. They were those who had been pressed back into the castle by the onrush of the dead-alive and those who had remained to garrison the island after Lugur's surprise attack. The mystery of the red dwarf's appearance was explained when we discovered a half-dozen of the water coria moored in a small cove not far from where the Sekta flashed their heads of living bloom.

The dwarfs had borne the shallops with them, and from somewhere beyond the cavern ledge had launched them unperceived; stealing up to the farther side of the island and risking all in one bold stroke. Well, Lugur, no matter what he held of wickedness, held also high courage.

"Yes, Larry darlin'," said Lakla, "my heart is like a bird, free from sorrow and singing."

"And mine's singing so I can hardly get my breath; an' why not, when the pulse of heart is you, *macushla,*" wooed the O'Keefe.

"An' I hope it's now you have no more doubt about the O'Keefe banshee." He turned to me with his old fire.

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"Doubt?" I asked mildly.

"Yes, doubt!" he repeated. "The old lady's given you proof enough for even your incredulous mind, old dear."

"Proof?" I asked again, perplexed. "But I saw no proof of her, Larry."

"You didn't!" he cried. "Well, she didn't come, did she?"

"No," I acquiesced.

"And I'm alive, ain't I?" triumphantly. "Well, then, do you want any more proof than that?"

Another picture—a vision of what might have been—flashed before me.

"I do not, Larry," I answered. "I concede the banshee. I want no more proof."

The cavern was paved with the dead-alive, the Akka carrying them out by the hundreds, casting them into the waters. Through the lane down which the Dweller had passed we went as quickly as we could, coming at last to the space where the coria waited. Rador and the frog-king we placed in our own, where sat, too, the little frog-prince and Lakla's woman monster. As we sped toward the Portal, my eyes were busy with the marvels of the fern-land.

Not long after we swung past where the shadow had hung and hovered over the shining depths of the Midnight Pool.

Here the bodies of the green dwarfs lay thick. Guards from the *ladala* manned the ebon fortresses and the bridge. Loud were their shouts of welcome to us, and clamorous the greetings of the throngs that lined the emerald road as we swept out upon it.

Upon Lakla's insistence we passed on to the palace of Lugur, not to Yolara's—I do not know why, but go there then she would not. And within one of its columned rooms maidens of the black-haired folks, the wistfulness, the fear, all gone from the sparkling eyes, served us. It was a silent meal; both Larry and Lakla so busy with handclasps, with little whisperings, and so taken up drinking in each other, that I felt rather sorrowfully lonely. Walking to the side, I looked out upon the frowning wall of the temple, not more than a quarter of a mile away.

THERE came to me a huge desire to see the destruction they had told us of the Dweller's lair; to observe for myself whether it was not possible to make a way of entrance and to study its mysteries.

I spoke of this, and to my surprise both the handmaiden and the O'Keefe showed an almost embarrassed haste to acquiesce in my hesitant suggestion.

"Sure," cried Larry, "there's lot of time before night!"

He caught himself sheepishly; cast a glance at Lakla.

"I keep forgettin' there's no night here," he mumbled.

"What did you say, Larry?" asked she.

"I said I wish we were sitting in our home in Ireland watching the sun go down," he whispered to her. Vaguely I wondered why she blushed.

But now I must hasten. We went to the temple; and here at least the ghastly litter of the dead had been cleaned away. We passed through the blue-caverned space, crossed the narrow arch that spanned the rushing sea stream, and, ascending, stood again upon the ivoried pave at the foot of the towering amphitheater of jet.

Across the Silver Waters there was sign of neither Web or Rainbows nor colossal pillars nor the templed lips that I had seen curving out beneath the Veil when the Shining One had swirled out to greet its priestess and its voice and to dance with the condemned. There was but a broken and rent mass of the radiant cliffs against whose base the lake lapped.

Long I looked—and turned away saddened. Knowing even as I did what the irised curtain had hidden, still it was as though some thing of supernal beauty and wonder had been swept away, never to be replaced. A glamour gone forever; a work of the high gods destroyed.

"Let's go back," said Larry abruptly.

"How long, Larry, do you think we'll stay here?" I asked.

"Not a minute longer than we can help, I'll say that," he answered forcibly.

"We can return, I suppose, by the passageway from the Moon Pool?" I said.

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He nodded.

"I asked Lakla," he replied; "she says yes."

I dropped a little behind them to examine a bit of carving—and, after all, they did not want me. I watched them pacing slowly ahead, his arm around her, black curls close to bronze-gold ringlets. Then I followed. Half were they over the bridge when through the roar of the imprisoned stream I heard my name called softly.

"Goodwin! Dr. Goodwin!"

Amazed, I turned. From behind the pedestal of a carved group slunk—Von Hetzdorp! My premonition had been right. Some way he had escaped, slipped through to here. He held his hands high, came forward cautiously.

"I am finished," he whispered—*"kaput! I don't know what they'll* do to me." He nodded toward the handmaiden and Larry, now at the end of the bridge and passing on, oblivious of all save each other. He drew closer. His eyes were sunken, burning, mad; his face etched with deep lines, as though a graver's tool had cut down through it. I took a step backward.

A grin, like the grimace of a fiend, blasted the German's visage. He threw himself upon me, his hands clenching at my throat!

"Larry!" I yelled—and as I spun around under the shock of his onslaught, saw the two turn, stand paralyzed, then race toward me.

"But *you'll* carry nothing out of here!" shrieked Von Hetzdorp. "No, by God!"

My foot, darting out behind me, touched vacancy. The roaring of the racing sea stream deafened me. I felt its mists about me; threw myself forward.

I was falling—falling—with the German's hands strangling me. I struck water, sank; the hands that gripped my throat relaxed for a moment their clutch. I strove to writhe loose; I felt that I was being hurled with dreadful speed on—full realization came—on the breast of that racing torrent dropping from some far ocean cleft and rushing—where? A little time, a few breathless instants, I struggled with the devil who clutched me—inflexibly, indomitably.

Then a shrieking as of all the pent winds of the universe in my ears—blackness!

Consciousness returned slowly, agonizedly.

"Larry!" I groaned. "Lakla!"

A BRILLIANT light was glowing now through my closed lids. It hurt. I opened my eyes, closed them with swords and needles of dazzling pain shooting through them. Again I opened them cautiously. It was the sun!

I staggered to my feet. Behind me was a shattered wall of basalt monoliths, hewn and squared. Before me was the Pacific, smooth and blue and smiling.

And not far away, cast up on the strand even as I had been, was— Von Hetzdorp! Von Hetzdorp, following me to the last—but dead! But was he dead? I tottered toward him, my hands flexing and clawing. For if he had not passed, then surely was whatever spark of life might be within him of short tenure. For I had but one thought—to cast myself upon his throat and choke life from him; yes, even though he lay there helpless.

And I would have done it! But there was no need. He lay there, broken and dead indeed. Yet all the waters through which we had passed—not even the waters of death themselves—could wash from his face the hideous grin of triumph. With the last of my strength I dragged the body from the strand and pushed it out into the waves. A little billow ran up, coiled about it, and carried it away, ducking and bending. Another seized it, and another, playing with it. It floated from my sight—that which had been Von Hetzdorp, with all his wicked schemes to turn our fair world into an undreamed-of hell.

My strength began to come back to me. I found a thicket and slept; slept it must have been for many hours, for when I again awakened the dawn was rosing the east. I will not tell my sufferings. Suffice it to say that I found a spring and some fruit, and just before dusk had recovered

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enough to writhe up to the top of the wall and discover where I was.

The place was one of the farther islets of the Nan-Matal. To the north I caught the shadow of the ruins of Nan-Tanach, where was the Moon Door, black against the sky. Where was the Moon Door—which, someway, somehow, I must reach, and quickly! But I had no boat, and over all the waters there was no sign of life. And well I knew none would go by this haunted place at night, or if they did, would dare to respond to the call of my fire.

So at dawn of the next day I got together driftwood and bound it together in shape of a rough raft, with fallen creepers. Then, with a makeshift paddle, I set forth for Nan-Tanach. Slowly, painfully, I crept up to it. It was late afternoon before I grounded my shaky craft on the little beach between the ruined sea gates and, creeping up the giant steps, made my way to the inner enclosure.

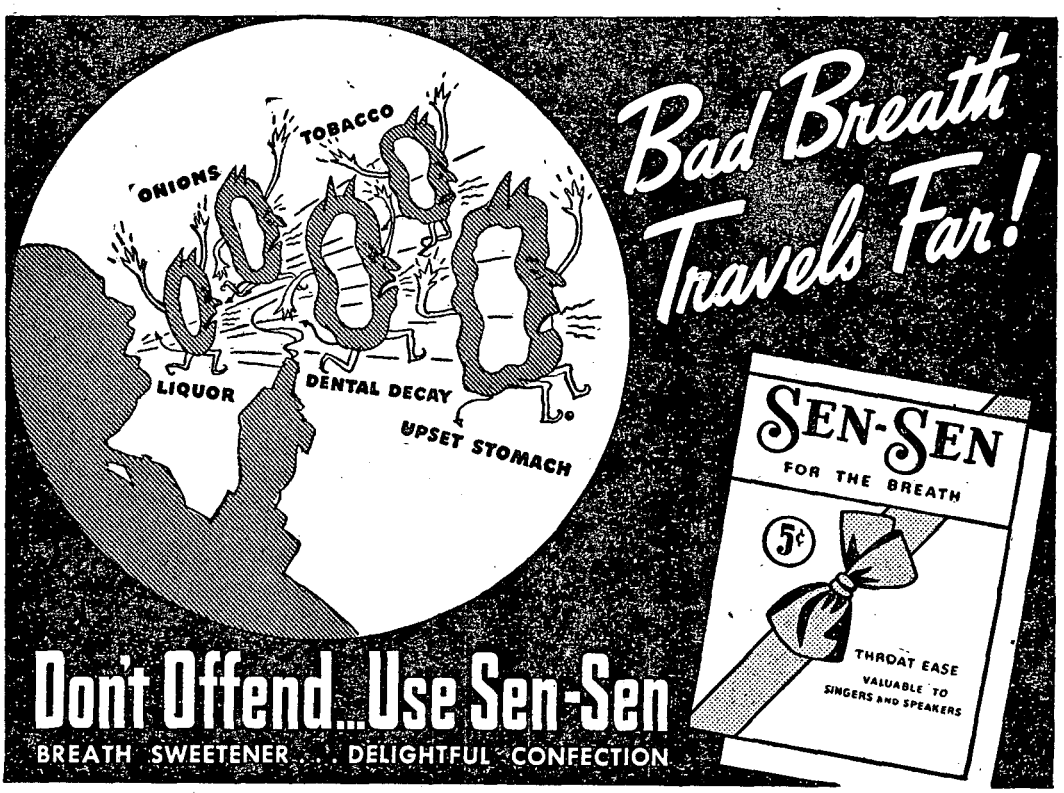
And at its opening I stopped, and the tears ran streaming down my cheeks while I wept aloud with sorrow and with disappointment and with weariness.

For the great wall in which had been set the pale slab whose threshold we had crossed to the land of the Shining One, lay shattered and broken. The monoliths were heaped about; the wall had fallen, and about them shone a film of water, half covering them.

There was no Moon Door!

Dazed and weeping, I drew closer, climbed upon their outlying fragments. I looked out upon sea. There had been a great subsidence, an earth shock perhaps, tilting downward all that side—the echo, little doubt, of that cataclysm which had blasted the Dweller's lair!

The little squared islet called Tau, in which were hidden the seven globes of Moon flame summoning the Dweller, had entirely disappeared. Upon the waters there was no trace of it.



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Moon Door was gone; the passage to the Moon Pool was closed to me—its chamber covered by the sea!

There was no road to Larry—nor to Lakla!

THIS, you who have listened to me so long, is the end of my narrative.

There, for me, the world ended. A canoe of native fishermen, two days later, picked me up. At Ponape I found that the Dolphin had never called, that there were rumors of her having been lost in a typhoon. Rumors that I afterward verified. The *Brunhilda* I left with the Chinaman who had guarded her so faithfully. I returned to find the interest in my first narrative, "The Moon Pool," so great that I knew it to be no other than my plain duty to reveal to what the happenings I had related in it led. And this I have done truthfully, as fully as I might.

And as a labor of love, a monument to those two bright spirits who I do believe saved this world of ours from unthinkable disaster—

Larry O'Keefe and Lakla, the hand-maiden!

Shall I ever see them again? Shall the world ever see them to do them that homage which they deserve?

I do not know.

But this I am sure. In that far land of mystery which seems now so irrevocably set apart from us they live—and are happy—gathering the fruit of their love and their high courage.

As for me—my heart is heavy, and I have much to do preparing the data I gathered in that too short time—hardly a month—for the study of my colleagues; the results of which will no doubt from time to time be placed before the public as it seems wise.

Echoing the words of one of America's immortals, Samuel J. Tilden, paraphrasing a little perhaps his thought, I say: "Having borne faithfully my full share of labor and care in the public service, and wearing the marks of its burdens, I seek the repose of private life."

With my heartfelt thanks to my associates who have assisted me in this narrative, and, to Mr. Merritt for his guidance and always ungrudging aid, I bid you all: Farewell!

THE END

Plants That Eat Humans

FROM the Island of Madagascar and from the darkest depths of Africa come persistent reports of plants that actually eat humans. Science has much reason to credit the truth in these stories. The fact that there are carnivorous, or meat-eating plants, is well established. Similar species of this variety may be purchased at your local florist, and other members of the species may grow to enormous size under favorable conditions.

One particularly extraordinary plant of this type, the Darlingtonia Californica, a member of the orchid family, is owned by Mr. William C. King, a Texas florist. This plant will even devour a piece of hamburger steak, its mannerisms amazingly imitating those of animals.

Another plant which grows profusely on the bottom of the sea is the beautifully colored sea anemone. This plant not only eats fish but is also its own fisherman.

There are many more of these carnivorous plants, such as the pitcher plant which has an ingenious way of catching insects in its "trap." And not the least amazing is the Venus's Fly Trap which hunts and eats animal food with the eagerness of a tiger. Experiments show that these plants often have almost human perceptions such as sight, touch and taste and apparently can even plan the murderous destruction of all other encroaching plant life in their vicinity.

Therefore, it is not beyond imagination that such flora as are vividly described in "The Beast Plants" could actually exist.

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Austin Hall

Author of "The Spot of Life," etc. Co-author with Homer Eon Flint of "The Blind Spot."

Written originally for "The Men Who Make The Argosy," August 20, 1932

HERE goes. Born under the redwoods of California in the early eighties. Educated until ten in common schools of native state, after that in the common schools of Cleveland, Ohio; graduated Lincoln High School; Ohio Northern, Ohio State, and University of California where I was finally rattled out of academic life by the San Francisco earthquake.

My first big crime was a newspaper career, after that a spell with one of the great electrical firms of the country, where I went up like a rocket as far as taking over responsibilities was concerned, but failed miserably when it came to acquiring suitable salary. Too young. Hours eight in the morning till twelve at night. Mad house—working for a will-o'-the-wisp. Finally went fishing—saw the sun rise over the mountain; quit working for any boss whatsoever. Free lance ever since.

Followed, real years, here and there, into the mountains, over the West and all about. Mining, freighting, ranching, even nesting on one of Uncle Sam's homesteads. Rolling along, singing a song—in the sunshine. Which means that I have never taken life seriously. I can't. Man is such a funny little bug that he amuses. Have never been able to understand myself—let alone anyone else.

Started writing by mistake. One of the cowboys picked up a story half written, made me finish it. Those same waddies carried it to town, had it typewritten and sent it to the editor of the old ALL-STORY MAGAZINE. The editor called it the damnedest lie ever concocted, and bought it. Have been writing ever since—Western, mystery, detective and fantastic.

In other words I am just a plain, ordinary, common American, he citizen.

I like baseball and football, the great outdoors, good companions, flowers, the sky, the earth, and everything there is in it.

AM INCLINED to be studious, love history, anthropology, economics, and theoretical physics. Am not a mystic; but do believe that we are on the threshold of the greatest of all discoveries, compared with which mysticism itself will shrink into insignificance. We are standing before a veil—behind which are a billion mysteries and laws. We know nothing; but the future is before us.

Finally, I believe that in spite of his humorous conceit, man is a great little bug. But like Mark Twain, I sometimes have misgivings. "The more I see of man, the better I like my dog."—Selah.

—AUSTIN HALL

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"Halt!" It was Xaragon the Dictator. "Not one shot must be fired in this temple! It means—"

Fire Gas

By STANTON A. COBLENTZ

Armies could not deal with the mad dictator in league with the powers of darkness on another planet, but Hal Remingway set out by himself to break down the vast network of evil!

I

ANTHONY J. REXWELL, Jr., president of the United States flourished a heavy blue document as he ranged along the carpeted length of the State Room. His energetic gray eyes looked angry and alarmed; his square fighter's jaw was thrust forward; his hands trembled as he turned toward his advisers, most of them uneasily seated, one or two standing with clenched fists and twitching features.

"So!" he bawled, brandishing the paper as if it were a bomb he wanted to hurl. "So Dictator Xaragon and his Trans-Eurasian gang think they have us trapped! After four years of the deadliest war in history, they imagine they've brought us to our knees! Gentlemen, I swear to you, as I revere the names of Washington, Lincoln, and—"

The long gaunt form of Clyde Barrow, Under-Secretary of Defense, shot from his seat. In his excitement, he committed the unheard-of act of interrupting the President. "Mr. Rexwell, you don't seem to understand! This is no longer a question of sentiment. Xaragon has us cornered. This new invention—why, the devil himself couldn't resist it!"

"It's all so new, sir, I'd better explain again," broke in Franklin Krow, Secre-

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tary of Chemical Warfare. "All we know is that the Trans-Eurasian air fleets have let down a new kind of bomb, which, on bursting, gives out a pinkish vapor that produces fatal skin sores. Gas masks, of course, are useless. But what has us stumped—"

"Yes, I realize," interrupted the President. "The pink vapor grows like a conflagration. It reaches out in all directions, emitting a deadly heat. That's why we call it Fire Gas."

"It starts some sort of chemical reaction in the air," Secretary Krow went on, "which continues in ever-widening circles, like a ripple spreading on a pond. Fire Gas appears to be a new nitrogen-carbon compound, built up out of the air—so that it can keep on forming without limit unless we find something to stop it."

"I know. I know," admitted the President, waving the blue document furiously. "This terrible new weapon was only introduced day before yesterday, and already, as you know, we've had to evacuate three important industrial centers."

"With a loss of a hundred thousand civilian lives!" added Daniel McCoon, Secretary of the Interior.

"What about Xaragon's proclamation over the international radio?" put in Vice President Hugh Glouster.

"Oh, that he'll make peace—on condition that we cede New York and New England? On the ground that they have Trans-Eurasian minorities! I'd see him in hell first!" stormed Rexwell, bringing his fist down so sharply on a table that an ink-stand overturned.

"Well, that's just where we'll be, all right!" argued Glouster. "Don't you see, Rexwell, Xaragon's hands are tightening about our throats?"

A heavy silence descended. Some of the conferees chewed bitterly at their lips, or despondently rubbed their brows; the majority stared at their leaders with expressions of hopeless melancholy. Too well they knew the ways of Xaragon—of Xaragon, the most ruthless of dictators, who in 1966 had waded through blood to control of Trans-Eurasia, and in the ten years of his rule had never scrupled to resort to any extreme of massacre or terror to enforce his will.

It was a cool-eyed and quiet-mannered but powerful-looking individual who at length broke the silence. All eyes turned with respectful interest to Hal Remingway, head of the National Intelligence Bureau, as he declared, with slow, calm emphasis:

"Mr. Rexwell, there is only one solution. To surrender to Xaragon would be unthinkable. We must move heaven and earth to find the formula of Fire Gas, and to unearth the antidote without delay—"

"My chemists are working to that end," interrupted Secretary Krow.

"Chemists be damned!" flung back Remingway. "What I have in mind is our secret agents. They must rush to Trans-Eurasia and dig up the formula."

"The idea sounds excellent, Remingway," sneered the President. "But it's a little like the question of which mouse is to bell the cat. You know Xaragon has iron walls up against espionage. Still, if you can suggest some member of your department—"

"Certainly, I can!"

Remingway stood erect, to his full five feet eleven, his keen dark eyes flashing. "In a matter of such importance, Mr. President, I do not believe in trusting subordinates. The game is up to me. So, with your permission, I will board a plane this evening."

"You?" burst out several astonished voices. "You?"

"Mr. President," continued Remingway, "I have spent years in Trans-Eurasia. I know the people, and the language. I am capable of disguising myself—in my youth I was a character actor. Naturally, I recognize the peril, yet—" His voice broke, but he continued, hastily, "Yet I can think of no better way to serve my country, if you will give permission, Mr. President!"

Rexwell stared long and earnestly at the head of his Intelligence Bureau. At

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length he spoke, in gruff tones that disguised an underlying softness, "We cannot afford to lose you, Remingway. But with the safety of all America in the balance, I cannot refuse any effort that offers even one chance in ten thousand. So go, with my blessings—and, remember, the future of the whole world may be in your hands!"

The President turned aside, biting his lip. And the last glance he cast at Remingway, as the latter hastened from the hall, was such as one may give to the doomed.

II

AT ABOUT one o'clock on a moonless night, an airplane circled down from an immense height above a mountain valley. Dipping and spiralling amid the blackness, it moved with muffled motors that no detecting device could have discovered; and feeling its way by means of a beam of pale blue light invisible from beneath, it wheeled about for some time before its pilot was able to locate a suitable landing place in a meadow.

After long manipulation, the last perilstage of the descent was completed; the airplane came bumping to a halt amid the thick grasses; a door opened; a shadowy figure emerged; the door closed again; and the airplane began jerking once more across the field, then rose in air like a great bird.

About a mile from the scene of this incident, a stooped figure was seen dragging along a country road just after dawn. His form, with the squalid coat and tattered shoes and trousers, was that of one of the aged beggars to be met occasionally in this remote district. He walked slowly, with infirm, faltering steps, supporting himself on a crooked staff. A black patch covered his left eye; his right temple showed a long, irregular scar; his beard was ragged and dirty; his teeth, discolored a brownish yellow, stood out hideously as he muttered to himself. His voice had the unpleasant squeak of extreme age as he paused every now and then to beg alms of a farm-hand or mule driver.

From most of those whom he accosted, he gained but a cold reception: "Begone, old man, and leave decent folks alone!" Or else, "These are hard times, with the country at war, and Lord Xaragon taxing the very sweat on our brows! We have nothing to give!" But sometimes a passer-by would ask a question of the old man—who was he, and where did he come from? He would put one hand to his ear, look puzzled, and ask to have the question repeated. It seemed that he was very stupid, as well as very deaf.

After shuffling along for some distance, he reached a river where some boys and men were merrily splashing. Instantly an alert look came into his one exposed eye. He sprang into a clump of bushes with an agility not to be expected of one of his years, and worked his way into a thicket, where shone a red patch—the discarded clothes of one of the swimmers.

Snatching at a coat and pair of trousers, he began going through the pockets with fevered haste. He paid no heed to coins or trinkets; but, coming across a small card stamped with a yellow seal, he muttered a pleased "Ah!" under his breath, and transferred the object to the soiled inner folds of his own garments. "Official Identification Card," it read, and gave the name, address and official number of its owner.

He emerged from the shrubbery and went hobbling on his way, but had to pause for a time while a uniformed procession went by, with flags, drums and rifles.

"What may that be, daughter?" he piped at a farm girl who stood by, milk pail in hand. "Such comings and goings were never known in the old days."

"Have you forgotten, old father," asked the girl, in the manner of one humoring a hopeless dotard, "our good ruler Xaragon has just called up the last war reserves?"

"Yes, it is so, it is so," cackled the old man. "I had almost forgotten, my poor wits wander so. What did you say our ruler's name is? My poor used-up mind grows to be like a sieve; everything goes right through it."

The girl's black eyes glowed pityingly.

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The man, observing the finely molded features, felt that she was just such a one as he would have liked, if—

But he dismissed the impossible from his mind and lifted one hand to his right ear, as if hardly able to make out her words.

"You see the white tower rising above the forest yonder, old father?" she went on, pointing to a wooded moutainside. "That is Karduspo, the wilderness home of Xaragon, our great leader. There he comes to decide on matters of peace and war."

"Have you ever been up there, daughter?"

"No, old father, how could I go? They say it is surrounded by an iron circle of guards."

The old man stared upward in silence; then pointed to a ring of spires that rose from a flat projection of the mountainside some distance below Karduspo. "And what may that be, daughter?"

"They say it is Xaragon's private temple, old father. There he comes to think over affairs of state. No one but he is allowed inside. Anyone else would meet a doom worse than death. So, at least, I am told. But who am I to know?"

The old man put one hand again to his ear; and, after muttering a word of thanks, went tottering on his way.

A few minutes later, having found a secluded forest trail that wound upward in the direction of Xaragon's temple, he removed the patch from his left eye and began moving briskly forward. His form had become erect and strong, although at the sound of any approaching footsteps he would slump down and once more appear slow and stooped.

III

XARAGON'S temple was a tall circular granite building about fifty yards across. It was windowless, but there were two entrances, one facing due north, one due south. Massive stone pillars shot up before each doorway; and the doors, which were of solid steel, seldom were allowed to swing open. At each portal a uniformed guard stalked, with naked bayonet glistening; and few were bold enough to approach within range of his challenging, "Who goes there?"

Yet toward dusk, on the day we have been speaking of, a bent old figure with a black patch across his left eye stumbled out of the forest and approached the temple's northern gateway. So weak and helpless he seemed that the guard saw no harm in letting him come near—particularly as he turned out to be a rather amusing old fool.

"Where am I, son?" he asked, in his shrill, piping voice. "I have lost my way, and it is hard on old bones to wander all day through the woods. Can you tell me how to get to the village?"

"Turn right back the way you came, Grandpa," directed the guard. "By my boots! Such as you have no business at Xaragon's temple!"

"Oh, Xaragon's temple, is it?" cackled the old man, surprised. "Sacred stars! Who would have thought it? I have always wanted to see Xaragon's temple. May I go in, son?"

The guard bristled. "Don't you know that anyone who goes in, except at Xaragon's command, will die a thousand deaths? I myself heard the screams of a poor wretch who stole in one day, though I have never been inside myself."

"I have often wondered, son," rasped the old man, "what our good ruler does in his temple."

"So have we all wondered, Grandpa. But it is not for us to think of. They say he goes there to meditate, and I know he comes often, and sometimes for hours, and when he walks out he has a proud, fierce light in his face and his eyes glitter strangely."

"No doubt he works some great charm."

"So some believe, Grandpa."

Becoming more communicative, the guard leaned close, and whispered, "It must be so, because sometimes I have heard a queer murmuring from inside, as if he was talking to the devil himself!"

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A minute later, the approach of a clattering, uniformed figure put an end to the conversation.

"There comes my relief, Grandpa," said the guard. "He's a new man, starting work this very night."

Twilight had already fallen by the time the newcomer had taken his post and the relieved man had left.

The beggar, who had slunk off into the shadows of a pine grove, waited for a few minutes and then hobbled slowly back.

"Who comes here?" challenged the sentry, with pointed bayonet.

"Nobody of any account. Have you a penny, my boy? Just one penny for a poor starving old fellow who is aching in all his joints—"

A snarl came from between the sentinel's lips. "Back there, you dirty old scoundrel, or you'll ache a damned sight more!"

"But I haven't eaten since morning, my son! If you have only a crust, just a moldy crust, as you honor your mother's name."

"This is a temple, not a charity house!" growled the guard.

"Take pity, my son!"

"Heaven pity you, if you don't clear out!"

Allowing his rifle to slip to the ground, the guard dashed at the beggar, as though to seize him and hurl him bodily away.

But as his hands closed about the feeble old arms, something unexpected occurred. The frail aged frame suddenly tightened into something vehement and powerful. The weak old fists shot out and dealt blows like battering-rams. The stooped figure straightened, and became lithe and athletic; the whole form leapt forward with a catlike lunge, and the arms, with a skilled wrestling grip, wound themselves about the guard's unprepared body.

So swiftly did the attack occur that the victim was unable to call for help. A hand on his throat choked out his cries as he fell heavily backward. He scarcely knew what was happening as he was beaten and strangled into unconsciousness.

A moment later the assailant, drawing a small vial from his inner garments, had forced the contents between the fallen man's lips. "Ah, there, my friend," he muttered, "I guess now you'll be quiet for a while!"

He began half hauling, half dragging the recumbent form into the darkness of the pine grove.

It was but a few minutes before a uniformed figure emerged, strode up to the temple entrance, took up the abandoned rifle, and began ranging back and forth with alert soldierly movements.

IV

OLEV, the new night guard at the temple's north portal, was a stalwart-looking figure. Nearly six feet tall, and with broad, well-developed frame, he had evidently not been able to find a uniform to fit him. His coat and trousers seemed a little tight, and his collar and sleeves were just a trifle short. But with his strong, clean-shaven features, his swarthy Eurasian skin and erect military carriage, he was a character to earn attention and respect.

From the first, he was a favorite with the other guards, with whom he would chum in his spare hours, smoking and exchanging anecdotes in the barracks where they slept and ate. He did not often discuss their master Xaragon; but occasionally he would listen with alert interest to tales of the temple and its contents.

"I am certain," maintained Kragg, the night watchman of the south portal, "that Xaragon has great powers hidden here, and performs mighty experiments. I have heard a tremendous rumbling and whirring from within." And Yuland, the day watchman of the south portal, had similar ideas. "I have listened to a flapping of wings," he swore, "and have seen lights flashing, and felt a wind rushing out. I fear Xaragon is in league with the Evil One."

After a few days, a minor flurry was caused by the discovery of a dead man in the woods. He was wearing a beggar's

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rags, had a long, dirty false beard, and wore a black patch over one eye; while a great crooked staff was clutched in his right hand. Yet, while made up to seem old, he was really not past thirty—a fact which caused little comment, for had not beggars been know to play such tricks before? It was not quite certain how he had come to his death; but, from his appearance, it was assumed he had eaten poisoned mushrooms from the forest, as many a better man had done. Since no one could have had any interest in doing away with such a good-for-nothing, the affair was not thought worth investigating.

Meanwhile the countryside was stirred with the news that Xaragon was returning to his mountain home at Karduspo.

About a week after Olev took up his post, the dictator arrived; and immediately went to his temple. Olev, who was off duty at the time, saw the leader approaching in the midst of fifty bayonet-wielding men. Saw the guard station themselves in even numbers at both doors of the temple. Saw Xaragon's broad, low brow and dark, Mongoloid features, his bristling black moustache above the wide, thick lips, and his surly cold black eyes as the iron north portal rattled open. Then for hours Olev watched, while the guard stood stationary as men of steel until at last their master reappeared, with a grim smile on his heavy features.

"Tomorrow he comes again," remarked Pelghru, the day watchman of the north portal, as Olev arrived to relieve him. "They say he consults the stars, and meditates on that which will shake the world."

Pelghru, as he spoke these words, did not notice the sudden narrowing of Olev's eyes nor the secret clenching of his fists.

Nor did he take careful account of Olev's actions the following morning when he was relieved. He did not observe how intently Olev followed his every movement as he unlocked the special safe-like iron door, of which he alone, as the most trusted of the guards, knew the combination. Then, having put everything in readiness for Xaragon's arrival, he did not suspect a ruse when Olev handed him a message to be delivered to Yuland, at the south portal.

Since he would have to be gone but a minute, he saw no harm in obliging Olev; it did not occur to him to doubt the latter's hurried explanation, "I'm in a rush to get away, old pal. Got a date with a girl down in the valley."

When Pelghru returned, in his ambling, leisurely way, Olev was already out of sight.

V

INSIDE the temple, all was deathly dark except for one uncanny blue light that burned from the ceiling fifty feet above. The intruder, feeling his way inch by inch, had the impression of walking among tall, inimical shapes that waited to swoop down and seize him. To his touch, the surfaces were hard, straight and steely cold, or glassy smooth and rounded; while now and then he felt his way along great pipes and over coils of wire.

By straining his eyes in the dim light, he could vaguely make out objects like huge inverted funnels, and other objects very like the enlarged ventilation tubes of steamships, and still others like long slanting poles arranged in groups.

After a long time, he concealed himself not far from the point where he had entered, crouching down amid masses of heavy black drapery that reached from the ceiling.

Hours went by, and he remained silently waiting, scarcely permitting his cramped muscles to move. At last, just as he was starting away, a heavy rattling to his right smote him with mingled hope and dread.

At the same time, the north portal clattered open and a flood of light burst in. But almost instantly the light was shut off again, to be replaced by an eerie deep red illumination as the snapping of a switch came to the hidden man's ears.

Through the dark folds of the draperies, while he again crouched near the floor, he could see but indistinctly. Yet he did make

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out that the entire room was filled with gigantic machines; with tubed devices like magnified radio receivers; with immense racks across which copper wires twisted; with gigantic lenses and mirrors; with motors, dynamos and enormous electromagnets; and with other engines whose nature he could not even surmise.

In the center of the hall, dominating everything, was a tower of red glass, which tapered from a ten-foot onion-shaped bulb to a slender projection like the periscope of a submarine. In front of it was a crimson light, with the sign, "Dangerous! Explosives!" Hundreds of wires entered it from all directions; dozens of dials and knobs stood out near its base; and several megaphones and tubes like telephone receivers added to the bizarre decorations.

As the concealed man strained behind his draperies, he saw Xaragon going to this contrivance, and, with an eager grunt, taking his seat in a little revolving chair at its base. The dictator pulled a switch, and wheels began to whir and levers to click. Then he pulled another switch, and spoke in slow, deep, hollow tones.

"Gunzabi, it is I! Earth speaking! It is I, Xaragon! I await further instructions, Gunzabi! Give me the perfected formula!"

These words were spoken deliberately and very clearly. Yet the eavesdropper wondered if he had heard correctly. What could Xaragon mean by saying, "Earth speaking!"? What formula did he refer to? Who was Gunzabi? And could it be that the dictator was awaiting instructions from some one far off in the universe?

Ten minutes went by, while Olev remained motionless, staring out through the uncanny dull red light. Xaragon likewise made not a motion. But meanwhile the clicking and whirring of the machines continued as an unpleasant undertone to the intruder's thoughts.

Then, with shocking suddenness, a voice broke out through the megaphones, calling in grating, machinelike tones.

"Rumterox speaking! Rumterox speaking! It is I, Gunzabi! We have caught your message. We will give you the new formula. The old compound was too slow-acting. The new gas will wipe out your enemies like a hurricane. Take this down, O Xaragon!"

There followed instructions for building up a substance out of nitrogen, carbon, oxygen, phosphorous, sulphur and several other elements, under particular conditions of heat and pressure. The hidden man meanwhile had slipped a small notepad and pencil from his pocket and strained to take down the message regardless of the poor light. But despite all his efforts, he missed several words, and had lost hope of filling in the gap when he heard Xaragon declare, "I did not quite follow, O Gunzabi! Will you not repeat?"

Again an interval of about ten minutes, before the reply came in the same mechanical tones, "Rumterox speaking! Here is the formula again, O Xaragon!"

As the spy jotted down the details, he performed some rapid mental calculations. Why had it each time taken Xaragon so long to get a reply? From anywhere on this planet, the response by radio would be practically instantaneous. But what if the message did not come from this planet?

THE calculator's head reeled. Although not aware of the precise present positions of the planets, he knew that radio waves, traveling at a hundred and eighty-six thousand miles a second, would require about ten minutes for the round trip to a spot fifty million miles away. Then was not Xaragon's "Earth speaking!" to be taken at its face value? Might it not be that he was communicating with some other world—say, with Mars?

Olev's blood turned cold within him at this thought. This, then, might explain Xaragon's unparalleled inhumanity! That he was taking instructions from some evil force beyond the earth! Some force whose ultimate aim, perhaps, was to destroy mankind!

His head was in a daze as he bent forward to listen. "Mix your elements carefully, O Xaragon! The substance can be

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made easily and quickly. If your enemies called the first poison Fire Gas, they will call this Whirlwind Gas, for it will spread like a whirlwind when you have dropped it on their heads, and the fleetest runner will not be able to outrace it. Use it soon and well, O Xaragon!".

Olev, his fists clenched until the nails bit into the flesh, started creeping forward. Such horror and fury filled his mind that he had some wild idea of springing forward, clutching the dictator from behind, and ending his maniacal career.

The draperies stirred slightly as the spy slid forward. But amid the whirring of the machines, the faint rustling was not perceptible.

Just then a rumbling came through the megaphones, a muttering and groaning as of contending voices. But Olev could make nothing of it at all, except that Xaragon seemed disturbed, and cried out, "Gunzabi! Gunzabi! Speak to me, Gunzabi! Tell me all is well—"

Keeping mostly out of sight behind the great, wired radio-like cabinets, Olev had stolen up to within ten yards of the dictator, whose black figure frenziedly pulled knobs and turned dials amid the eerie red light. The rumbling from the megaphones momentarily died down, then was resumed at an increasing tempo, when Olev shot out from his concealment, resolved to risk all in one desperate dash.

But as he started, his foot struck a hidden wire. With the brazen note of a fire alarm, a chorus of great bells filled the place with their sudden clanging. And, at the same time, a battery of arc-lights shot out a blinding white blaze.

Olev, at the first terrifying peal, had crouched low, darting back amid the draperies; while the dictator, wheeling about in consternation, uttered a frightened gasp.

Almost as he did so, the north portal and the south portal burst open simultaneously, and the guards rushed in, their bayonets glistening, their cries ringing forth tumultuously.

"There is someone here!" Xaragon bellowed, his mighty voice bawling above all the others'. "Some traitor! Some spy! Catch him, men, and, by my teeth, there will be not one bone left whole in his body!"

Even as these words were shouted, the hidden man came forth, not slowly and cautiously, but dashing full speed, no one was certain where from.

"Where is he? What is it? Is our great leader safe?" he panted, apparently half beside himself.

In his guard's uniform, he attracted little attention—particularly as he was immediately accosted by Pelghru with a cry of, "Oh, you here too, Olev! Come, there's no time to waste! We've got to catch that black devil!"

And so Olev joined the other guards in searching for the suspected spy in every dark place and in the inmost recesses of the machines.

VI

VARIOUS and conflicting were the rumors circulated following this episode. Some said that the spy had been caught and executed. Others claimed that he was still at large, but that Xaragon's men were hot on his trail. Still others maintained that there had been no spy, and that a short circuit or other accident had rung the alarm. And as nothing was known definitely, this explanation was most widely believed.

On the morning after the incident, Pelghru again opened the temple door to prepare for Xaragon's coming; while Olev watched alertly as he worked the combination. But Xaragon did not come; and that evening it was whispered that he had left the vicinity.

That same evening, after relieving Pelghru, Olev turned to the door under cover of darkness. In one hand he held a pocket flashlight, with which he could barely read the numbers on the lock. But he remembered very clearly Pelghru's various maneuvers; and he moved with expert skill, since his work had taught him all about locks.

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Accordingly, it was not many minutes before the hinges began to creak and the door swung inward.

Within the temple, all was as eerily dark as before, except for the single blue light shining high above. With crawling caution, by means of the flashlight, Olev worked his way forward, around the shadowy machines, taking care not to step on any wire that might set off an alarm.

It was all of five minutes before he had reached the tower of red glass in the center of the building. Pausing before the huge onion-shaped bulb, he examined the various dials and knobs beneath the projecting megaphones. He thought he remembered, in general, how Xaragon had worked the machine; but, in any case, now was no time for hestitation. And so he immediately pulled a switch.

There was a whirring and a sputtering, and a red light flashed on.

He pulled another switch, and a blue light came into being. Simultaneously, there arose a banging noise that made the intruder shrink back in alarm.

"Better go more carefully there," he cautioned himself, as he pushed a knob. A low continuous buzzing came from the machine, and a little tube like the mouthpiece of a telephone lowered itself to the level of his lips.

"Earth speaking! Earth speaking!" he called into the tube. "Answer me, Rumterox! Answer! I have need of your instructions!"

Knowing that it would take ten minutes for the response, even if the apparatus were working properly, he crouched uncomfortably on the floor, while cold shudders crept down his spine as he stared at the intricacy of dim, faintly rumbling machines.

It seemed to him that much more than ten minutes passed. It seemed that his efforts had failed; that surely he had pulled the wrong switches. He had just leaped up to try again, when a deep, sepulchral voice sounded through the megaphones:

"Rumterox speaking! Rumterox speaking! We have caught your message, O Earthling! We rejoice that you will confer no more with Gunzabi and his forces of darkness! We rejoice that you have turned the Ninth Vibration switch, and tuned in instead on us—on Llevelyn and the Legions of Light! You will be rewarded, O Earthling!"

In stunned amazement, Olev could only conclude that he had turned the wrong switch, and, by so doing, had contacted not the evil powers evoked by Xaragon, but a group of superior beings.

"Hear us, O Earthling!" the voice went on. "For long we have tried to reach you. It is now more than two years, as you count time, since you solved the secret of the infra-ether waves, and learned to use the pulsations of space to talk with Rumterox—which you call Venus. It is over a year since you taught us your speech, which was hard to pick up even by beings of our intelligence. But Gunzabi found a means of reaching you—Gunzabi, the master of all black arts. From that time until this day we, the Powers of Light, have had no chance!"

QUIVERING with excitement, Olev had drawn out his notebook and pencil.

The voice halted for a second. The lights flickered, and went out, but instantly shot on again. And the unknown continued, to the accompaniment of a louder buzzing than before:

"Gunzabi, in order to prove his power, has offered you the Formula of Damnation—the formula that once threatened to drive all life from Rumterox. Fortunately, however, we have an antidote—"

"Antidote! What is the antidote? For Heaven's sake, tell me!" cried Olev, forgetting for the instant that the speaker was millions of miles away.

There came a slight suspicious rattling from the direction of the north portal. A vague warning sense told of something hostile that moved through the darkness. At any other moment, Olev would have run for cover. But he could only listen in rapt attention as the voice continued:

"Day after day, O Earthling, we have been awaiting our chance to tell you the

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antidote. Now we will reveal it at last. Listen carefully!"

The rattling from the north portal was unmistakable. Olev's every instinct was to take flight. But he was as a man glued down, while his pencil raced across the pad.

"Wherever the Fire Gas is spreading," went on the informant, "pour a solution of sodium chloride. This will absorb the gas, and combine with it to form a harmless neutral substance. The action is instantaneous, and will save your world!"

"What!" thought the astonished Olev. "Can mere common salt be the remedy?"

"Have faith in us—in Llevelyn and the Legions of Light, O Earth—"

All at once the voice was drowned out. The faint rattling had grown to a terrific pounding and clanging. With a thudding din, the north portal burst open, and a rush of uniformed men stormed in. Simultaneously, the entire place was bathed in a white blaze.

Springing around the onion-shaped glass bulb, Olev checked himself with a gasp of dismay. A score of men were crowding in from the south portal as well!

VII

FOREMOST among the intruders, in that dazed fraction of a second, Olev observed a well known figure with low, dark brow, bristling black mustache, and insolent eyes.

He could even see the faint triumphant smile on Xaragon's face as the dictator pointed to him and cried, "Grab him, men! By my sword! We will make the worm squirm before we stamp him underfoot!"

Although the odds against him seemed millions to one, Olev made a sharp dive, trying to plunge out of sight behind the great machines. At the same time, a shot rang out, and a bullet twanged against his right ear.

But instantly there arose the crash of Xaragon's voice, in anger and alarm, "Halt there! Not one shot must be fired in this temple! You do not know—you do not know the consequences!"

Crouching low along the floor between two rows of wired cabinets, Olev looked in vain for a place of refuge. From around a bend just in front of him, a uniformed giant had sprung with a roar, bearing down upon him like a football tackle. But Olev had drawn his automatic pistol, resolved to sell his life dearly.

Even as his finger pressed the trigger, he heard a second assailant springing at him from behind, and felt his arm clutched and jerked forward. The attacker had been too late to check the pistol's discharge, but had deflected the course of the bullet, which leapt upward, above the head of its intended victim, straight toward the tower of red glass.

There came a spattering, shattering sound as the bullet struck above the onion-shaped bulb; then a great crash as the entire superstructure of glass collapsed in a rain of fragments. And almost instantly, before anyone could realize just what was happening, a greater commotion arose above the yells of the men and the clatter of the rent glass.

A puff of smoke burst forth, and an eruption of green flame; accompanied by a detonation like that of a cannonade, as the remains of the red-glass tower were lifted; it seemed, by some Titanic hand and shot upward in a thundering explosion.

COMING to himself, Olev found that he lay in the midst of a bloody shambles. The two cabinets, between which he had been crouching, had protected him from the worst of the blow; but his clothes were torn, and his face and arms were bleeding where fragments of the glass had lacerated him. From all sides, through the darkness, he could hear the groans and moans of Xaragon and his men in a tormented chorus. Then, after a minute, some rescuers bearing torches burst in, and he could see the victims lying sprawled all about him, like the casualties of a battle.

No one observed him as he began crawling off, worming his way through the wreckage to the north portal. No one noticed as he slipped through the gate,

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and slunk away along the dim path toward the woods. Nor did anyone ponder the identity of the filthy old beggar who, after bathing his wounds in a stream and rummaging among refuse heaps for discarded clothing, went hobbling along the road the following morning, soliciting alms.

When evening had fallen again, an airplane circled with muffled motors over a small bare plateau high above Karduspo, as it had done every night recently. A figure below signaled with flashes of a small searchlight; it shot down to a landing; and the figure entered, and heaved a sigh of thanksgiving as the machine began wheeling skyward.

VIII

AN AIR of solemnity hung over the State Room as President Anthony J. Rexwell, Jr., paced back and forth among his advisers. A peaceful smile had appeared on his face, which showed the marks of long strain. "Yes, gentlemen," he reminisced, "the antidote came barely in time. You know, as well as I do, that in another few days Fire Gas would have wiped out every population center in the country. But we learned to check it—"

"Thank Remingway, Mr. President!" put in Clyde Barrow, Under-Secretary of Defense. "If it hadn't been for him—"

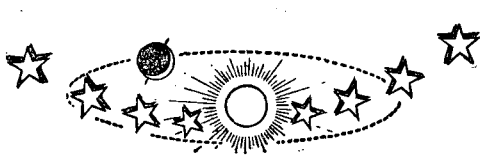
Barrow paused, and pointed to the head of the Intelligence Bureau, who, looking somewhat pale and with bandaged hands and face, sat modestly in the rear.

"I do thank Remingway," resumed the President. "Don't we all thank him for turning the tables on Xaragon? I assure you, that dictator got the surprise of his life when he found we could use Fire Gas against him, while he didn't know the antidote!"

"Well, let's not speak unkindly of the dead," said Remingway, rising. "The poor devil got his when he had to sue for peace on our terms, then was forced to abdicate, and finally died in misery from the after-effects of the explosion. Still, I've often thought, Xaragon had the most marvelous invention in history, if only he'd used it properly—"

"Come, come," interrupted Rexwell, "we're getting off the point. What I've summoned you for is this. My term of office expires next year, and, as you know, I've decided not to run again. Just now there's no more popular man in America than Hal Remingway, the Savior of his Country. And no one more capable, either! And so, Mr. Remingway—Olev—" The speaker paused, then finished with a benignant smile. "I propose to use all my political weight to secure you the nomination for President."

Remingway's mouth gaped wide with astonishment, and he raised one hand protestingly. But he could not check the chorus that dinned about him in admiration and prophecy, "Remingway for President! The Savior of the Country for President! Hurrah, hurrah for Hal Remingway, next President of the United States!"



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The Readers' Viewpoint

Address comments to The Letter Editor, Famous Fantastic Mysteries, 280 Broadway, N. Y.

New Stories Welcome

The publication of FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES is manna from Heaven! I too, now believe in Santa Claus, R. L. Francis!

A word about Sam Yapolsky's protest that "The World in the Balance" uses a too familiar formula. That's not the point, Sam. The point is that this story is good enough to be classed as a Famous Fantastic and worth reprinting.

Keep Finlay for the weird and beautiful and Paul for the strange planetary scenes.

I agree with Stanley H. of Pardeeville, Wis. that young love has a place in science and fantasy fiction but the classics now being presented in reprint must appear in their original form and cannot be altered to permit the presence of a species of the *femme fatale*. With new stories that are being written, it's different, of course.

And now, the inclusion of a new story, "Son of the Stars" in F.F.M. for February makes it easier for me to say something that is very important. For two decades the pages of Argosy have been used as a battleground by the enemies and the adherents of science-fiction. This controversy can now easily be settled. Print all new fantasy and science-fiction such, as "Minions of Mars," "The Ninth Life," etc., ordinarily intended for Argosy, in F.F.M.

J. WASSO, JR.

PEN ARGYL, PA.

Rating Feb. Contents

I have been reading Science Fiction for only about two years. During this time I heard a lot about such stories as "The Moon Pool" and "The Radio Man" and bemoaned the fact that I wasn't one of the "old timers" so as to have these classics among my collection. You can imagine how I felt when F.F.M. appeared on the newsstands with the "Moon Pool" in the first issue. The February issue is perfect. Here is my rating of the stories.

1. Conquest of the Moon Pool
2. The Radio Man
3. Son of the Stars.
4. Man Who Saved the Earth
5. The Sky Woman
6. Plunge of the "Knupfen"
7. The Kiss of Death

I hope to see more of Farley's "Radio Man" stories soon. And by all means the "Golden Atom" stories by Cummings.

On top of such excellent reading material you give us the two best artists, Frank R. Paul and Virgil Finlay! If you intend having a picture on the cover why not have it within the circle? It would give F.F.M. a dignified look.

Now for a few "kicks." Must you print such stories as "The Kiss of Death"? I like weird stories, but not that one. And how about enlarging "The Readers Viewpoint." Or else have some other department.

PHILIP BRONSON.

HASTINGS, MINN.

Answering Mr. Yapolsky

There is one improvement I feel can be added to F.F.M. Have a department similar to "The Readers' Viewpoint," but devoted entirely to discussions by the readers and authors, as to the plausibility of the plot on which a story is based.

In the February issue you printed a letter by Sam Yapolsky, in which he states: "'Who is Charles Avison?' is mainly an incredible network of coincidence with not a shred of plausibility. One of the most obvious flaws was the failure of the earth astronomers to discover the "other earth" through the effects its gravity would have on the orbits of the earth moon system."

I would like to disagree with Mr. Yapolsky on this point. In the first place he fails to take into consideration the fact that the two earths and the sun always form a straight line with the sun in between. Also that our earth and this new earth are between 185,850,000 and 188,000,000 miles apart, a distance which is greater than that which separates Mars and the sun.

Secondly: The effects which this new earth, which I shall refer to as Earth II, might have on our Earth Moon system would be made completely negative by the effects we know to be exerted by the sun, instead of increasing the sun's effect as would be the obvious conclusion to draw.

Thirdly: Even if my previous premise were to be proven wrong, it must be remembered that Earth II has been there as long as Earth I which we inhabit, and consequently all figuring and results in regard to gravitational effects have been obtained on a basis that there was no planet like Edison Tesla Marshall's

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Earth II, but that all effects were caused by the sun.

If this be true, we are laboring under a misapprehension, because, in that event, we are giving the sun credit for being stronger than she really is.

I would welcome any discussion on the part of the readers, and would like to be corrected if I am wrong.

ANDY ANDERSON.

NEW YORK CITY

"The Blind Spot"—Bargain!

Congrats on the Feb. issue. It's super colossal. I would like to drape a laurel about your head but alas there is no room. Keep giving us the classics. I'm overjoyed beyond conception upon the announcement that "The Blind Spot" is going to be reprinted. The last time I priced it, it was five dollars in original form; now I can get it for 15c an installment. Some bargain—no?

Now for the stories I want. The other two of Farley's radio stories. Kline's Mars, Moon, and Venus stories. All of Merritt especially "The Metal Monster." "The Princess of the Atom", "Darkness and Dawn", "Palos of the Dog-Star Pack", "Jason, Son of Jason", "Brand New World", "The Devil of the Western Sea", "Fungus Isle", "Into the Infinite", etc.

Why not a nice cover by Paul or Finlay?

LEWIS MARTIN.

DENVER, COLO.

Collector Speaks

Am pleased to say that the "gem" of fantasy, F.F.M., is still mounting higher. In contrast with the first issue I see remarkable improvements. First you give us Finlay, then Paul, and to top it off you have Binder—a very good illustration.

The colors of the February cover are the best yet. I'm glad to see that Finlay is doing the strict fantasy illustrating, and Paul the science-fiction. I only hope that the former will do the entire "Blind Spot" as that story is more fantastic than scientific. I, by the way am the proud possessor of the original story.

I agree 100% with Mr. Berg on having F.F.M. published bi-weekly or weekly.

I have a unique way of collecting F.F.M. Instead of purchasing one copy, I buy two of each issue. The one I save until the next month's issue, then bind the two together in a loose-leaf folder (though I remove the rings). This way I can place them along with my regular bound books. It's really very neat.

The second copy I excerpt serials, waiting until I possess the complete three to six parts, then bind them. As for shorter stories, I bind them together with the originals, of which I possess many.

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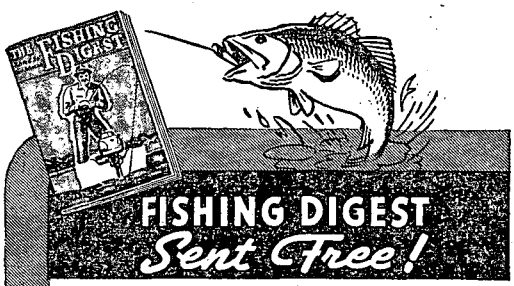

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One thing more; F.F.M. has awakened in me the old longing for fantasy fiction which I lost a few years ago.

FRANCIS J. LITZ.

ROCHESTER, N. Y.

Talking It Over

If you're at all acquainted with Brother ARGOSY, you may have seen my nom-de-Underwood before. For I'm an adherer to the ancient tenet that one man's opinion is as good as the next hombre's, wherefore I rise on occasion and speak my piece.

Right now, words seem to get away from me when I try to hit on an adequate way of telling you how much I prize our new mag, F.F.M. It's the last word, Suh—the thing everybody was waiting for, and if you don't print it more than once a month I think you're missing a chance to drag in just that many more shekels; but maybe that wouldn't interest you?

I'm buying three copies every issue, and if it came out weekly I'd get the same number, for reasons of my own, which entail being a collector and a fairly expert binder of serial-books.

Having the Feb. issue to hand, I'll give you a sort of review of reviewers, and attempt to drive home what your readers are telling you.

Says Mr. Musil of Cleveland: "We fans asked for a monthly; we got it. We asked for Paul and Finlay, and got them, too." If Finlay isn't the tops for illustrating fantasies, I give up. I extend the congratulatory paw. Shake, mister! But what I started to say is; I hope Musil will join me in squalling for a semi-monthly or weekly publication.

Robert Berg adds: "Twice a month or even weekly instead of monthly," and he seems to have a whole Science Fiction Club behind him. Me, I'm yelling the same thing, and I've got friends, too!

Sam Yapolsky refers to Argosy's splendid fund of fantasy, and he's right. It is a splendid fund. Haven't I got ARGOSY since 1909, ALL-STORY since 1913? I oughta know, and I do know. There is no necessity for your ever using new stories.

Daryl McAllister is the old-timer who really talks for me! "Don't forget Philip M. Fisher," says Mac, and don't you, either. He concludes: "You would find it hard to believe what a wealth of tender regard we old-timers have for the old tales." You don't (or do you?) know what it means to be a real fan, to be able to travel beyond the moon, out of the solar system, to the infinite distance of impossibly remote suns, to forget utterly the foolishness that one meets every day on this minute globule called Earth by the even more minute inhabitants thereof!

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Remember that Perley Poore Sheehan, in his early period, wrote some great fantasies; don't think you can avoid England's "Darkness and Dawn" trilogy and give us Giesy.

Congratulations, and the best of luck!

"PANURGE".

COLUMBIA, S. C.

Wants Classics Only

I want to express my appreciation for a magazine that fills a long felt need.

For several years I had been trying to secure a copy of "The Conquest of the Moon Pool."

Regarding future publications, I would like to read all of Merritt's stories, particularly "The Face in the Abyss" and its sequel, "The Snake Mother", "Dwellers in the Mirage", and "The Ship of Ishtar". I believe, also, that Giesy, Smith, Taine, Farley, Flint, Hall, England, Serviss, and Cummings would be continually welcomed by your readers.

In the February issue I noticed a new story and am wondering if it indicates the coming of many new stories and few reprints. If that is your intention, you might remember that there are many magazines that publish new stories. If you need fillers, there are many classics among the old short stories.

KARL J. RADIN.

CANTON, OHIO

Science Fiction Club

We saw that you printed our first letter in the February issue and were happily surprised.

A poll was taken of members of the S. F. Club of Flushing and we found that the following stories are in our opinions the best ten stories printed in your magazine so far. They are in the order of their quality.

1. THE RADIO MAN. For good entertainment, the best so far.
2. THE MOON POOL and THE CONQUEST OF THE MOON POOL. So far—swell.
3. THE LORD OF DEATH. Flint is one of the best writers of SF we know.
4. THE GIRL IN THE GOLDEN ATOM. More like it, please.
5. THE WHIMPUS. Eerie! You bet.
6. ON THE BRINK OF 2000. It gave us something to think about.
7. THE MAN WHO SAVED THE EARTH. Once you got to the story—good.
8. ALMOST IMMORTAL. Now we know we like Hall's stuff.
9. THE MOON METAL. Very good. Almost number eight.
10. LIGHTS. Is Philip M. Fisher any relation to Steve Fisher?

As for *Paul* and Finlay please never let them go.

ROBERT BERG.

FLUSHING, N. Y.

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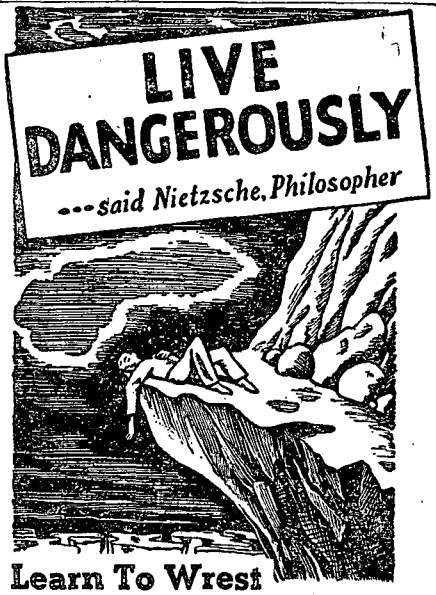

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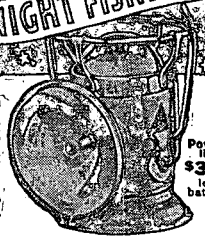

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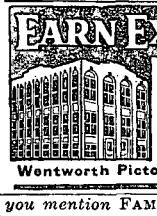

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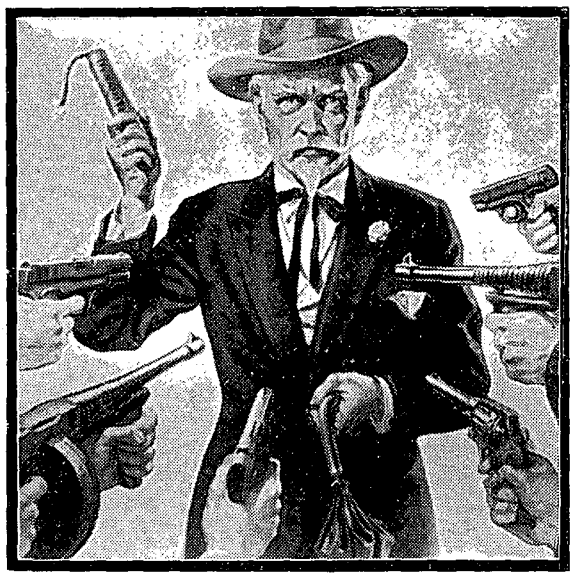

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